



Want Healthy Food? Grow it Yourself.

It's Easier Than You Think.

by L.C. Baker

It's common knowledge that the food you eat is integral to your health. **But what isn't so well known is the dangers that sometimes lurk even in the healthiest foods.**

Several studies have indicated that organic food has more nutrients—and of course, fewer pesticides—than its conventional counterparts. But there's also some evidence that even organic pesticides could be toxic, and the organic label isn't always a guarantee that food is healthy (witness the recent E. coli organic spinach scare). The sad truth is this: any time you buy food in a grocery store, you're never completely certain what went into the producing and handling of that food. The gap between the farm and your plate is simply too wide. The only time you can really know the history of your food is when you buy it from a farmer you know and trust or when you grow it yourself.

And, of course, growing it yourself has additional health benefits. Having a garden gives you a reason to be outdoors, lets you enjoy exercise, and makes it surprisingly easy to enjoy your veggies.

For many people, cost is one of the biggest obstacles to eating healthy. Organic food can cost as much as 60% more than conventional, and local food at the farmer's market, while varying in cost, is often more expensive than the food grown on big agribusiness farms that profit from bulk. But growing food yourself can be almost laughably cheap. Even the most expensive seeds (I usually buy organic seeds from a local gardening store) are still inexpensive at \$3.99 for a packet. A packet might even last me through two seasons, since the space in my garden is pretty limited. Depending on what vegetable I'm planting, just three or four plants usually provide more than enough for my husband and me to eat. More often than not, I find myself taking gifts of corn and squash to the neighbors.



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The psychological benefits of gardening are so well recognized that horticultural therapy is developing as a branch of psychological care. But anyone who enjoys gardening doesn't need a scientist to tell them how good gardening is mentally and spiritually. There's a deep satisfaction in this creative partnering with the earth to help something grow. For me, gardening in the city has been a welcome and much-needed respite from the industrial confines of city life. My garden is an oasis, a place that feels safe. It's right next to the main road, but somehow it's quieter there. Every time I go, I'm amazed by how the sounds of traffic and the stress of the city seem to fade away.

I will admit that for a city girl like me, growing my own food took a surprising amount of courage. When I first joined an intown community garden (an option that allows even city apartment dwellers to find a plot of land to call their own), I was terrified of doing something wrong. I'm not sure what was so frightening, unless it was the simple idea of living things depending on me for their lives. I hadn't planted anything since my third grade science class.

For the first few weeks of my garden membership, I pestered the garden manager with constant questions. Is it too late in the year to plant kale? Am I watering too much or too little? How deep a hole should I dig for garlic seeds? He just laughed at my concerns. "You know," he pointed out, "this isn't rocket science. Just put them in the ground and see what comes up."

There was something tremendously freeing about his unconcern. "Just put it in the ground and see what comes up," I chanted to myself as I carefully

dug holes and placed three seeds in each one, following the package instructions.

But I was still amazed when something actually did come up. And despite a few failures (my potatoes didn't quite make it), my

first winter garden was a resounding success. But perhaps even more amazing was the afternoon when I saw the garden manager casually grab a handful of spinach from his plot and pop it directly into his mouth. "You're just eating it?" I demanded. "Just like that? Don't you have to wash it first?" He shrugged. "Why? I know what's in it."

I had never thought of it before, but he was right: I knew exactly what was in the vegetables in my garden—and exactly what wasn't in them. There were no pesticides, no chemicals, nothing but the nutrients from the soil. And so, feeling



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daring and rebellious, I tried it myself: I plucked a handful of kale from my own garden and ate it.

It exploded in my mouth with more flavor and texture than I'd ever thought any greens could have—let alone kale. I'd never known kale could be so crunchy. Or so juicy. Or so sweet. I realized with surprise that I'd never eaten fresh kale before, and I bent down for another piece. Yes, I decided proudly, even I could be a gardener. And if I can, then it's definitely not rocket science.

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