



Edible Landscaping Made Easy

# The Spring Garden

MADE EASY



Avis Licht



Edible Landscaping Made Easy with Avis Licht

# The Spring Garden Made Easy

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# INTRODUCTION

Spring is always an exciting time in the garden. We're coming out of winter dormancy, and both plants and people are ready to get cranked up. Bulbs, buds and seeds are bursting open. It can seem a little overwhelming when you first start a garden. Follow the steps set out in this booklet and you'll be off to a great beginning. Gardening is a never-ending journey of learning, and it's fine to start off small and simple.

Whether you have a small deck or patio or a large yard, there are many ways to introduce edibles into the garden. Keep in mind that you want to enjoy yourself in the garden and you don't want to make it a giant chore that you can't keep up with. Grow what you love to eat, to smell and to look at and it will make your time in the garden totally enjoyable.

## WHAT IS AN EDIBLE LANDSCAPE?



You may be wondering what I mean by “edible landscaping”. The term has been around for over 30 years, but it seems people are taking a new interest in this type of gardening.

For those that love to grow their own food and for those that want to have a beautiful garden, we can blend the best parts of both worlds. Edible landscaping is a way for you to get deep satisfaction out of growing healthy, tasty food AND make your yard look beautiful.

Incorporating food plants into your landscape will save water, improve your habitat diversity and give you the best, freshest, tastiest food. It's no longer necessary to have a large front lawn that no one uses, or to put your vegetables in the back forty. You CAN have it all. With a little guidance and experimenting you'll find the best way to plan your garden for both beauty and bounty.

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# CLIMATE

Find out your [growing zone](#) and I'll show you how to use that information. In addition to knowing how cold it gets in your climate, you'll want to know when is your [last frost date](#). Your growing zones tell you what plants will grow best in your area. The last frost date tells you when to start sowing or planting. This information will be found on seed packets or in the garden planner that I will tell you about.

Even though you have a particular zone number, you also have your own special climate, known as a [microclimate](#). A microclimate can give you areas in your yard that can grow a wider variety of plants than you would imagine. An example of a microclimate is the different sides of your house. For example, if the south side receives good winter sun, you can grow frost tender plants like lemons and limes near the house. The north side of the house is shadier and cooler. The east side of the house gets morning sun and is protected from the late afternoon heat in summer. These are nuances that will take some time and observation on your part. Experiment and have fun with it. You'll need to work with the benefits and restrictions of your microclimates.

To help you plan your garden be sure to note the movement of the sun in different seasons. If you live in a windy area, find protected places for your plants or plant windbreaks. It helps to look up the rainfall, both in total amounts, but also when you can expect rain. In some climates rain only falls in winter, and in others there is rain in summer as well. So learn your sky's habits.

Fill in the following information:

USDA CLIMATE ZONE: \_\_\_\_\_

LAST FROST DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

START DATE FOR SOWING SPRING SEEDS \_\_\_\_\_

START DATE FOR PLANTING SEEDLINGS \_\_\_\_\_



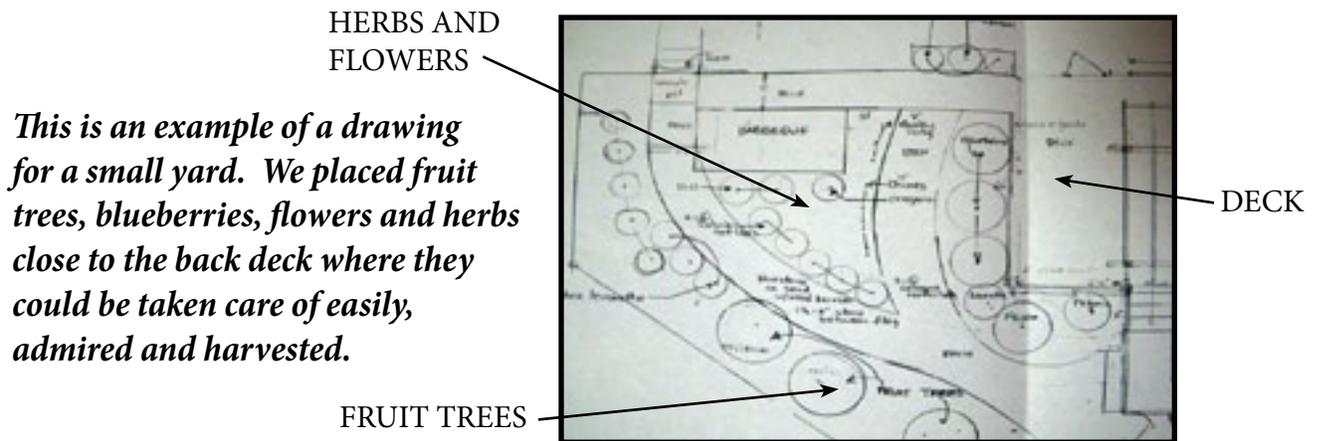
*This squash leaf is creating shade for the lettuce and is making it's own mini microclimate*

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# SCOPE

Now you will want to determine the [scope of your project](#). What I mean by this, is basically how big, or small do you want your garden to be. Will you be planting a few containers on a deck, putting in a small vegetable garden, or starting your edible landscaping project? The size of your garden will help you decide on what to grow and how much to grow.

This is a good time to go out into the garden and look around. Take a pencil and paper and note your garden layout. Be sure to put in your north arrow. By noting North you will be reminding yourself of where the sun will be shining and where you may find shade blocking your favorite spot. It may be from a tree or house or fence. I'm passing on hard earned lessons from not paying enough attention to the effects of buildings and trees on my own growing grounds.



You also want to keep in mind how much time you have to devote to your garden. It's easy to put in a large vegetable garden in the enthusiasm about spring, but much harder to keep it going all season long. Plant less than your excitement would lead you and you will be able to take better care of it.

If you have room for 2 garden beds of 3 ft x 6 ft, that will be enough to supply 2 - 3 people with veggies in the summer. You can add a few pots near the kitchen for some herbs and edible flowers. The closer your plants are to the house, the easier it will be to harvest them.

A 20 ft x 20 ft garden is large enough to produce food for a family of four, including food to put up for the winter. So the caution is, only plant what you can take care of easily and still enjoy the work necessary.

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# SOIL

I can't overstate how important your soil is to the health of your garden. Soil is NOT dirt. Soil is a living, breathing entity, full of life forms, nutrients and moisture that interact with the roots of your plants to grow healthy, nutritious, beautiful food.



*By learning your soil type you will know what to add. There are three different types of soil: sandy, loam and clay. Sandy soils drain water quickly and don't have much nutrient in them. For these soils you will want to add compost and additional fertilizers. Loam soils are considered the best for vegetable growing. Clay soils have a lot of nutrient, but can hold too much water. They need additional humus to balance them out.*

An easy way to test your soil is to get a clump and moisten it. Try to roll it into a ball.

1. **Sandy soil** has a gritty element - you can feel sand grains within it, and it falls through your fingers. It can't be rolled to make a sausage shape.
2. **Clay soil** has a smearing quality, and is sticky when wet. It is easily rolled into a long thin sausage and can be smoothed to a shiny finish by rubbing with a finger. If it is not a heavy clay it won't get quite as shiny and be as easy to make a sausage. It probably has loam or sand mixed in it.
3. **Loam soil** is the gardener's best friend, being a perfect balance of all soil types. But even though they are very good soils, it is important to regularly add organic matter, especially if you are digging or cultivating these soils every year.

To learn more about your soil type and how to use it, read [this article on soil](#).

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Each of your plants has specific needs, but they often overlap and you don't have to worry too much. For most vegetables you need to prepare the soil by aerating it, either by digging, forking or rototilling. Add [humus](#) in the form of compost or manure. Add nutrients appropriate to the needs of your plants. Seed catalogs are an incredible source of information on the growing requirements of plants. There are many [organic seed companies](#) and their catalogs are free. You can also find them online. When you decide on what plants to put into the garden, be sure to check out their special needs.

Here are a few things you can do to keep your soil healthy.

1. Add humus in the form of compost and manure. Other organic nutrients include bone meal, wood ash, kelp, cottonseed meal, alfalfa meal, blood meal, green sand, and more. In the beginning, I recommend that you add compost and manure and see how your garden grows.
2. Lay out paths in your garden so that you don't walk on your planting beds. Walking on the soil compacts it so that neither water nor air can penetrate it. Plants need air and water. Paths are for walking and beds are for planting!



3. Make raised beds when possible. Simply put, raised beds increase aeration, help with drainage and allow intensive planting. I've written about [raised beds in this post](#) if you want to know more.

4. Make sure you have good drainage. Most plants hate having their roots sit in water. Dig your beds and fork them open to break the hardpan. If you dig a hole and fill it with water from the hose, it should drain in less than an hour. If not, then loosen up the bottom or dig a ditch away from the bed to have the water move away from the plants. It's all about movement and not stagnation.

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# COMPOST



There are few additions to the garden that are as useful as compost. You can't use too much of it, it won't burn your plants like too much nitrogen and it increases the entire health of the soil as well as the plants. It is easy to put your kitchen wastes and some dried leaves in the bin and let the worms do their thing.

In order to have healthy soil you need compost. You don't need to be religious about your compost (like some of us), but it's simply crazy not to put your kitchen wastes and garden leftovers into your own compost. Why give away something from your own site that can become garden gold? Please read about [easy ways to compost in these posts on my blog.](#)

For years I've been putting kitchen leftovers into my compost bin and like magic it just decomposes. I swear I've never turned my compost once. The best tip I can give you is this. If your pile is dry and sitting there doing nothing - add some water and "green" matter, like kitchen scraps or green leaves or weeds. If it looks wet and sappy, add some "brown" matter like dried leaves, sawdust or grass clippings that have dried out. The best way is to observe your own situation.

***This small composter keeps out all critters and fits on a deck or small area easily. You put the food in the little trap door. Mix your wet garbage, like food scraps, with dry matter, like leaves, weeds and sawdust at the rate of 1 part wet to 10 parts dry. Introduce worms into the bin, either by putting some topsoil from your garden into it, or buying some earthworms from the nursery. You can also find that a little manure added will get your compost going fast.***

***(Don't put dog or cat poop into your compost as they can transmit diseases.)***



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The difference between a “hot” compost pile and “cold” pile is the heat generated by the decomposition of the materials and the rate of decomposition. Compost stays cool when you continually add material to it. Regular additions of kitchen waste keep the pile cool, and worms find that they like this atmosphere just fine. A pile will get hot when it is built all at once and begins to combust. This kind of pile needs to have the right combination of wet to dry materials. To find out how to build a hot compost [read this article](#). Both kinds make excellent compost.



*This photo shows a partial break down of the food that was put into the bin. Worms did all the work. Worms eat the food and poop out perfect soil. What can I say, it's true. It also doesn't smell bad at all. Quite fresh, actually.*

From this point on you can put the compost into the soil around your plants. Work it in gently with a trowel. You'll also be introducing worms into the soil, which is a spectacular thing to do.

There is more to learn about composting and worms, but I really want you to get started. Your garden will be healthier and produce better tasting food using your own free compost. Read more about worms in [this article](#).



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# SEEDS AND SEEDLINGS

## Early Spring

In early spring you can either sow seed in your house under grow lights, in a cold frame outside, or in a greenhouse. If you have a large garden you will save money by sowing your own seedlings. But if you have a small garden I recommend buying the seedlings from a nursery. You can get the plants you want and choose from a wide variety.

There are a number of online garden planners that will help you figure out your sowing and planting dates using your zip code, if you're in the United States. Kitchen Gardeners International has an easy to use garden planner for the vegetable garden. You can try it for free for 30 days, then pay \$25/year if you want to keep it. Go to <http://gardenplanner.kgi.org/>

Wait for the weather to warm up enough for the crops you are planting. You don't want to work soil that is too wet or too cold. Patience is a definite virtue when planting the spring garden.

Buy seed for those crops that need to be sown directly into the ground. I'll tell you about these below.



### Light for starting seeds:

**Most seedlings require 14 to 16 hours** of direct light to manufacture enough food to produce healthy stems and leaves. The characteristic legginess that often occurs when seedlings are grown on a windowsill indicates that the plants are not receiving enough light intensity, or enough hours of light. Even plants in a south facing window will not have enough light early in the season.

**You will need to use [grow lights](#).** When growing seedlings under lights, you can use a combination of cool and warm fluorescents, or full-spectrum fluorescent bulbs.

Incandescent bulbs produce too much heat in relation to the light given off. They also lack the bluespectrum light that keeps seedlings stocky and dark green.

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*Seedlings need a high intensity of light. The fluorescent bulbs should be placed very close to the plants—no more than three inches away from the foliage—and should be left on 14 to 16 hours per day. If you are growing your seedlings on a windowsill, you will need to supplement with a few hours of artificial light, especially during the winter months.*

**The temperatures for optimum germination listed on seed packets refer to soil temperature, not air temperature.** Although seeds can vary drastically, most vegetable seeds need a warm soil temperature, around 75 deg. F. You don't need a thermometer, but think of it as sun warming up the soil.

**If the soil is too cold, seeds may take much longer to germinate, or they may not germinate at all.** To provide additional warmth, you can use a heat mat or place the containers on top of a warm refrigerator, television, or keep them in a warm room until the seeds germinate. Just be sure to get your seedlings to a sunny window or under lights within 24 hours of seeing little sprouts emerging through the soil surface.

**After germination, most seedlings grow best if the air temperature is below 70 deg F.** If temperatures are too warm (over 75), the seedlings will grow too fast and get weak and leggy. Most seedlings grow fine in air temperatures as low as 50 degrees, as long as soil temperature is maintained at about 65 to 70.



*Give seeds light and warmth, keep them moist, and they will work hard on your behalf. At the risk of repeating myself, the best thing you can do in the garden is to observe your plants. Keep an eye on them and they'll let you know if they're happy.*

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# ANNUAL VEGETABLES

## ANNUAL SPRING VEGETABLES



**Sow** Lettuce, Spinach, Chard, Kale and Bok Choy into seed pots and then move into the ground. These plants can also be sown directly into the garden when the soil warms up.

**Sow** Broccoli, Cabbage, Cauliflower, Brussels sprouts into pots 6 weeks before transplanting. You can direct sow Broccoli in late spring. Of all these, Broccoli is the easiest plant to grow.

**Sow** Carrots, Radish, Beets, Turnips, Horseradish, Parsnips directly into the bed where they will grow. (Root crops don't like to have their roots disturbed.)

**When deciding where to put your vegetables, consider how much sunlight you have.** Most vegetables need at least 6 hours a day. Put the vegetable garden close enough to the house so that you won't forget to take care of them and just as important, to harvest the food. I've been to many gardens where they've simply lost track of the season and haven't harvested what they've grown.

**For daily care and water needs, it's good to concentrate your annual vegetables together.** But this isn't to say that the vegetable area can't also look fantastic. As part of your edible landscape you can make the vegetable garden look beautiful with flowers, herbs and trees. Be sure to choose plants that have similar requirements in terms of sun, soil and water.



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# PERENNIAL VEGETABLES



**Perennials live for many years and should be put where they won't have to be moved.** Some of the best perennial vegetables are asparagus, artichoke and rhubarb. Only plant these if you have room in your yard and love to eat them. I wouldn't grow these strictly for ornamental value, although they are beautiful. It's all about choices. How much you can take care of and what you love to eat.

(Each of the links below will give you detailed information on planting). If you want to learn about more unusual perennial vegetables have a look at this site, [Perennial Vegetables](#). I have to say that most of them are very unusual, but why not try a few

new plants?

1. [Artichoke](#): This plant is a large plant that is related to the thistle. It can get to 4 ft tall and 6 ft wide. It definitely takes up a lot of space. It prefers a mild coastal climate with full sun, or afternoon shade where the summers are hot. Start with dormant roots or plants in pots in late winter or early spring a month before the average date of the last spring frost. They are heavy feeders. Artichokes can be challenging to grow, but provide interest in the ornamental landscape and are fun to harvest. Commercially, they are a heavily sprayed crop, so are a good choice to grow organically at home.

2. [Asparagus](#): This is one of the most dependable home grown vegetables. After you harvest the new shoots in early spring, let them grow up into feathery wands that look beautiful. They need to be cut down completely in the winter. For this reason, in the edible landscape, you'll need to site this plant carefully. It will take 2 to 3 years to come into production, but once it does you will have fresh asparagus for 10 to 15 years.

3. [Rhubarb](#): One important thing to know about rhubarb, is that the leaves are poisonous. Only the stems are edible! This shouldn't dissuade you from growing it. Just make sure you harvest it correctly. Rhubarb is a beautiful plant, tropical looking, making a great addition to the edible landscape. Rhubarb requires a sunny location and a fertile, well-drained soil. It needs some winter chill for thick stems and good color. In general, it is an easy plant to grow. Fertilize it, water it and then wait two seasons before harvesting. Your patience will be rewarded with a delicious, and long-lived plant.

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# FRUIT: TREES, SHRUBS, AND BERRIES



The easiest and most ornamental edible plants are fruit trees and shrubs. In a small yard you should consider using dwarfs and miniature trees and shrubs. They not only take up less room, but are easier to prune and harvest. Some trees, like lemon, lime and fig can be grown in pots and containers with a good result. They don't mind having their roots confined. They actually grow very well in pots.

When planting your trees be sure to consider available sun in all seasons. The summer sun is high in the sky and the winter sun very low. Also consider the effect of these trees when they've grown taller. Place fruit trees where they won't shade plants as they mature. By using deciduous fruit trees you will have shade in the summer and light in the winter.

*An [espaliered tree](#) can be trained to grow against a wall or fence. This requires summer pruning on a regular basis. Once you learn how, they are incredibly productive and ornamental in a small space.*



You can have great fruit growing in a small garden. Here are some of my favorite and easy to grow fruits. Each of them has their own particular needs, so be sure to look up which varieties are best for your climate.

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If you want a fruit tree for a small space, consider a [genetic dwarf fruit](#) tree. They are bred to be smaller without pruning. You can have full sized fruit from a genetic dwarf tree. These include apple, cherry, nectarine, peach, pear and more.

**Blueberries are one of the easiest** fruiting shrubs that are also ornamental. They need acidic soil to produce a good crop. Please read my article on [How to Pick a Blueberry](#), for more information. Dwarf blueberries are good to grow both in the ground and in containers.



*Traditional blueberries are perfect for the edible landscape. Easy to grow, when given their preferred acid soil and plenty of water, they provide some of the most delicious and nutritious fruit.*

**Citrus are wonderful for the edible landscape** because they are evergreen, fragrant, produce fruit and look beautiful. Included in the Citrus family are lemons, limes, grapefruit, kumquats, mandarin oranges and tangelos. They need full sun, with protection from heavy frost. They all need well drained loamy soil. Another winner.

Citrus need nitrogen to grow well, especially in pots, where the roots use up nutrients quickly. For more information on growing citrus in containers read [this article from Four Winds Growers](#). Whenever plants are put in pots, be sure they get enough fertilizer to keep them healthy. Water them regularly. Pots can dry out quickly because they are exposed to the sun and wind.

*Citrus trees can be grown in large pots in a sunny spot near the house . Choose naturally dwarf varieties so that they won't outgrow their containers. by growing in pots, you can move the plants to a protected spot in the winter.*



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**Whenever plants are put in pots**, be sure they get enough fertilizer to keep them healthy. Watch the leaves. If they turn yellow or get stripes of yellow and green, then you need to fertilize. Water them regularly. Pots can dry out quickly because they are exposed to the sun and wind. You can use compost regularly and organic fertilizers made especially for citrus. You can usually find these at your local nursery. Be sure to ask for organic fertilizer, such as E.B. Stone.

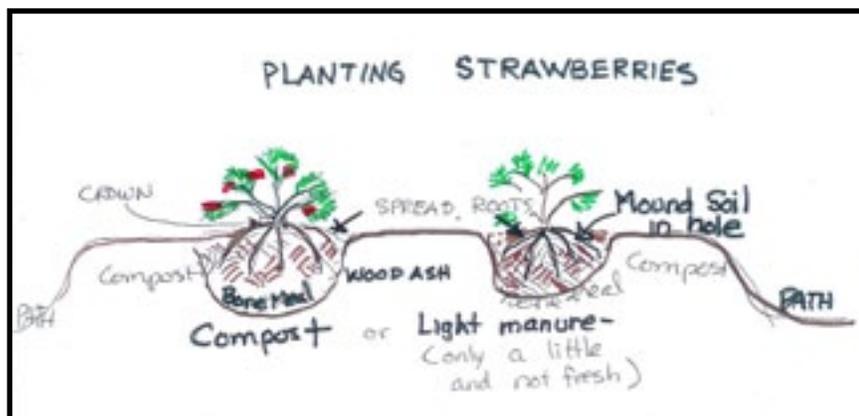
**Surprisingly, fig trees** can be easily grown in pots. Normally a fig will grow quite large, but it can be tamed to fit your small garden in a pot and still be healthy and produce plenty of fruit.



*The [Pineapple Guava](#) is one of my favorite plants. It serves many purposes in the edible garden. It's an easy care, evergreen shrub that has edible flowers, edible fruits and somehow, the deer DON'T eat it.*

*Where I live, deer eat almost all our plants, so having one that does all these good things is a real treasure.*

[Strawberries are easy to grow.](#) They can be grown in small areas, they can be planted in pots and they can be spread around the garden. They like full sun, well drained soil and regular watering until the fruit is ripe. Then reduce the irrigation to make your fruit sweeter.



*Commercial strawberries are one of the most heavily sprayed plants both with herbicides and pesticides. It is much better to grow your own organic strawberries.*

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# FLOWERS

**Planting flowers throughout your vegetable garden** not only makes it more beautiful but creates diversity and health. Flowers and herbs provide nectar and pollen for the insects, bees, birds and butterflies, without whom we would not have any food.

**Flowers that are edible and easy to grow include:** Calendula, Marigold, Nasturtium, Scented Geranium, Daylily, Pansy, Lavender, Rose and Borage. Most herbs have edible flowers. I like to place my flowers and herbs along the edges and the end of beds. they look good, encourage pollinators and don't interfere with the harvesting of your vegetables.



*Another flower that I love is the delicate viola. In addition to using as decoration it can be crystallized with sugar. This site, called [Baking 911](#) gives excellent directions on how to make candied flowers. They also tell you which ones to use and which ones to avoid.*

*Create a diverse environment in your garden with flowers and herbs that will entice pollinators to come visit. Creating beauty as well as bounty will help lead you down this path.*

**Roses have always been used** in the classic landscape design, but we can use them too in our edible landscape. Middle eastern recipes often call for Rose Water. You can buy this in specialty shops that carry middle eastern food. Putting a few drops in a fruit salad is simply divine. Not only can you use petals in your food presentation, but Rose hips are filled with Vitamin C and make an excellent tea. You can see that there are probably many more traditional plants than you would have imagined that your new garden can happily include, without feeling guilty.



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# HERBS



Herbs have been used for healing and cooking since the beginning of humans walking upright. They are ancient and hardy. It is impossible to imagine cooking without the flavors of herbs. But we shouldn't forget their importance to our health. Long before there was Tums, there was mint tea. Before there were sleeping pills there was chamomile. I'm just saying. Imagine going out into your garden and picking fresh mint, basil or dill. There is nothing better.

Consider: Basil, borage, chamomile, chervil, chives, cilantro, dill, lavender, horseradish, marjoram, mint, oregano, parsley, rosemary, sage, tarragon and thyme. Just plant a few to start with and see how you like them. I bet you'll want more.

By going to local nurseries you will find appropriate herbs for your garden. Peruse some of the catalogs in the [resource page](#) of my website and you will find many herbs both common and unusual that will be just right for your site.

***Keep your herbs near the house where you will be more likely to use them. Some delicious and common culinary herbs include thyme, sage, purple basil, green basil, cilantro, tarragon, parsley, chives and rosemary. These are all easy to grow and best used fresh in cooking. If you grow nothing else, try a few herbs.***



***Lavender is beautiful, hardy, fragrant and wonderful for bees. I've written a number of articles on growing herbs. Read more in [Herbs in the Edible Landscape](#)***

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# IRRIGATION



**Unless you live in a rainy climate**, you'll need to irrigate your garden. Like everything else, there's much to learn about water, irrigation and the needs of your plants. But looking at the simple and easy version will still get you on your way.

## Drip irrigation

Drip line tubing conserves water, puts it directly into the soil near the plants and reduces weed growth. Many plants do not like to have water on their leaves, which encourages mildew and rot, so drip irrigation is very good for these plants. Drip irrigation can be more costly to set up than spray and take more time. Installing drip irrigation correctly is worth the time spent learning how to do it.

Robert Kourik has written an [excellent book on drip irrigation](#), available in print and as an ebook. I highly

recommend it. You'll be able to put in a very good system with his directions.

## Spray

Overhead spray sprinklers are easy to use and can cover a large area quickly. They are also good for watering seed beds. Oscillating sprinklers will cover your whole area. But they don't have any subtlety. They will water your paths and plants that don't want overhead water, like your roses. Use this method if you have to, but it's not my first choice.



## FINAL WORDS

You've got enough information now to get the Spring garden ready. Your edible landscape will delight you and feed you. Find the balance that works for you, in your garden and in your life. We don't want to make the garden a burden, but rather a happy addition to your life. My teacher, Alan Chadwick, would say, "The garden makes the gardener". Keep your eyes open and the garden will be your greatest teacher.

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