

Gardening on a

There's no need to let a lack of dollars cramp your gardening style, says *Teena Crawford*.

Gardening is great fun, keeps you active, and the end results can be very rewarding. It also need not cost the earth. Take an integrated approach following commonsense guidelines, add a little imagination and creativity, and your garden can be the envy of your family and friends.

Start by making the most of what you already have around the home. Fallen leaves, especially in autumn, make excellent mulch. Small leaves can be put straight onto garden beds, while large, thick leaves are best shredded by running the lawn mower over them. The leaf cover suppresses weed growth, helps with moisture retention and, over time, breaks down to provide added nutrients for your garden.

Leaf litter is also a great addition to compost. Making compost at home is easy, economical and environmentally friendly. Less waste ends up in landfill, and your garden soil is enriched for little monetary cost. Compost can be spread on top of garden beds as a mulch layer, or dug in to improve your soil before planting.

The best compost is made from a balanced mix of ingredients including egg shells, vegetable and fruit scraps from the kitchen, shredded newspaper, lawn clippings, autumn leaves and garden prunings. There is a range of compost bins available including some suitable for small gardens. Alternatively, you can use a worm farm to compost kitchen scraps if space is limited. Worm castings make fabulous fertiliser for the garden or can be diluted in water to make liquid fertiliser. As well, in some areas councils manage green waste disposal in such a way that they can offer residents cheap mulch or compost for sale.

With water costs skyrocketing it makes good sense to follow good water conservation practices in the garden. Water your garden in the morning or evening to minimise evaporation. Less frequent, deep watering trains plant roots to grow deep down into the soil. Use water-efficient systems such as drippers or soaker hoses, which apply the water at the soil surface so less water is blown away in the breeze.

The use of water conservation products such as water-storing granules and wetting agents in conjunction with the above, leads to greater water efficiency and therefore smaller water bills. For further water savings, grey water can be harvested from the home. Untreated grey water from the laundry can be applied to the root area of ornamental plants (not plants that are eaten) if low-sodium and low-phosphorous detergents are used. Simple grey water diverters and more elaborate systems are available. Contact your plumber or local water authority for advice and guidelines.

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No matter whether your garden is new or established there is always room for a few new plants – but these can be inexpensive, too. New plants can be propagated from home using plant material from your own garden. Friends and neighbours are great sources for extra propagating material. Some plants are difficult to grow from cuttings but any novice will have success growing cuttings of lavender, daisies, pelargonium and hydrangea.

Perennial plants divide easily to make new plants. Instead of purchasing several plants of the one type of perennial, limit yourself to one. Grow it in the garden for one year, dig it up in the winter, divide it into several plants and replant to fill out the garden space.

Offshoots develop at the base of established cacti and succulent plants such as agave, echeveria and crassula. New plants can be created by carefully removing these with some root system attached and planting them. Depending on the plant variety it is a great method to grow lots of extra plants in a short time.

Then there is the opportunity to reduce the household food bill by growing fruit, vegetables and herbs at home.


Fruit trees in the garden are productive and also provide shade, screening, flowers and perfume. Where space is limited, grow your fruit trees espaliered (trained) against a fence or in large containers. A range of trees provides fruit throughout the year; any excess can be frozen, preserved or shared with your neighbours.

budget

Vegetables and herbs can be grown in a small, sunny area of the garden, in between other ornamental plants or even in pots. Foam boxes from the local fruit shop make an excellent pot substitute. The foam's insulating qualities help keep the soil warm in winter and cool in summer. Using pots or boxes also makes your vegetable garden portable so you can follow the sun depending on the season, and store unused containers out of sight.

Most people grow vegetables and herbs from seedlings purchased from the local garden centre. For economy's sake, try growing your own seedlings. Seed packets containing enough seed for multiple crops can be purchased for just a few dollars. Seed is best germinated using commercially available seed-raising mix. For best results sow seed at a depth that is equivalent to the seed's diameter. Very fine seed is best left uncovered.

When harvesting, leave one or two plants behind to set seed. This can be collected, stored in a paper bag, and sown the following season. This method is ideal for vegetables such as tomato, basil and lettuce, and for many flowering annuals such as nasturtiums, cosmos and sunflowers.

For more gardening activities, join a volunteer or friends group. Most botanic gardens and significant green spaces have volunteers who help with general maintenance, preservation and development. You can become involved to the level that suits you and enjoy a great social outing where knowledge and ideas are shared with the professional caretakers while you are doing what you love – gardening! 

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Yates Garden Guide (42nd edn) is a practical guide to all aspects of gardening in Australia. The Yates website is also packed with articles about gardening, helpful hints and projects to tackle at home.
Web www.yates.com.au

To locate the friends group of your favourite botanic gardens visit www.friendsbotanicgardens.org (click on 'Members').

