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HOW TO START A FLOWER GARDEN

Start small. Enthusiasm for gardening is great, but can rapidly dry up when the work mounts. Start with a small flower bed, say 25 square feet, which is room for around 20 to 30 plants with perhaps three types of annuals and one or two perennials. You can always increase your plantings as your experience grows.

- If even a 25 square foot plot seems like too much, make a small border or do your first flower gardening in a container. Two or three plants sharing a fancy container can look stunning and give you a sample of what's to come.

Make a detailed landscaping plan and dig a flower bed to fit that scheme, if you want. On the other hand, if you're no good at planning on paper, or you know about where and how large you'd like the bed, simply lay it out right there in your garden.

- Laying a garden hose on the ground is one way to mark or plan a gentle curve. If you have a lawn adjoining the bed you are digging, remember to leave yourself mower access.

Choose a site. How much sun an area gets is a prime consideration. Six hours of sunlight will do for the greatest variety of plants. Stay away from underground utility lines and allow at least three feet from a building or fence.

- In hot climates, it is best to have some shade from the relentless afternoon sun, so a flower bed to the east of a building or fence usually works best. This also gives some protection from the hot drying winds that usually come from the west.
- You can grow a garden even if you get 12 hours of full sunlight, but you should be more careful about which flowers you choose to grow. Pick ones that love full exposure to the sun. Your garden will also need more frequent watering.

Choose a site with good soil, if possible. All soils can be improved, but avoid areas with shallow, rocky soil, areas where water stands, or steep slopes. Stay at least 20 feet (6.1 m) away from a large tree or five feet away from a sizable bush. Trees will compete with your garden for water and nutrients. #Get a soil test. While not strictly required, a soil test will help to determine what nutrients the soil requires and will tell you the fertilizers that soil needs as well as its pH. Your local Department of Agriculture extension service can help.

Start Digging. Once you locate a site and mark out the boundaries with a water hose, remove all sod and pieces of grass or weeds that may re-sprout. Using a spade or garden fork, completely dig up the bed to at least eight inches deep, a foot deep is better. Remove rocks or any debris.

Level the bed and break up any clods with a rake. Add one or more inches of compost or manure, more if the soil is poor. If the soil is sandy, add peat moss or grass cuttings to improve the soil's water holding capacity. Add lime if the soil is too acid. Most plants like neutral to slightly acid soil.

- Soil amendments such as compost can be bought by the bag or sometimes by the truckload. Work the amendments into the top six inches of soil along with a general-purpose fertilizer such as 10-20-10.

Buy the plants or seeds then plant according to their directions. Smaller plants go in the front of the bed. Most plants are planted at the same depth they were growing. Firm the soil around them. Remember when placing plants that they will grow, so start with extra space and read the labels carefully to see how much space to leave them.

- Get a variety of flowers because they bloom at different times and this will keep your flower garden always in bloom.
- If you do not have many flowers blooming early spring or late summer, drive around your area and see what is blooming. Go out and buy a few of these and plant them. After doing this a couple of times, you will have flowers almost all year round.

Water thoroughly. Like a good waiter, a good gardener will check whether water is required before watering. How much you water will depend upon the needs of your plants, the climate and exposure, and how much rain your yard gets.

Cut spent blooms periodically. Many plants will re-bloom, but only if the old blooms are cut. Also, support and prune your plants as necessary.

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