

Stuck at home from the quarantine? Start a Garden!



Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office

April 15, 2020



Robert Marshall resides in Friendswood and is a certified Texas Master Gardener with the Galveston County Office of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service.

News column printed in the Galveston Daily News, The Post, and other Galveston County Newspapers.

PHOTO CREDIT: William M. Johnson

Gardening provides your children an opportunity to discover the science and art of gardening. Gardening can also be a great way to productively pass the time when social distancing and self-quarantine are being practiced.

On my online Nextdoor app for Friendswood, I see people asking what they can do for entertainment while in self-quarantine because of the COVID-19 pandemic. My response was get out and do yard work and start a Victory Garden.

Gardening can be a great way to productively pass the time when social dis-

tancing and self-quarantine are being practiced while also adding greenery and potentially some fresh food for the dinner table. With most schools closed until further notice, gardening is also a way to help keep kids focused (and perhaps to teach a few lessons on science, math and responsibilities!).

Gardening provides exer-

cise. Gardening also provides your children an opportunity to discover the science of gardening and you can get a few fresh vegetables or maybe just fresh cut flowers to have on the dinner table. If you live in an apartment with a balcony you can garden in containers, or if you live in a house with a yard you can find great pleas-



ure in getting your hands dirty for an hour or two each day as you tend the garden.

Containers can be anything you can lay hands on, half whiskey barrels, fifty-five gallon drums cut in half or an old number three washtub like the one your grandparents all claimed to use on Saturday night to take a bath in out behind the barn. Small metal stock tanks are a favorite but expensive. Try to make sure the container is at least a foot deep and has plenty of drainage holes in the bottom.

The general recommendation for back yard gardens is to build raised beds. The default raised bed is 8-to-12 inches in height, between 3 and 4 feet wide and as long as you want. However you can lay out the beds to any shape or size desired. Remember keeping the beds 3 or 4 feet wide allows you to plant new plants as needed and to be able to easily reach weeds without walking in the bed. Keeping the width of raised beds to 3 or 4 feet also makes watering and harvesting easier.

Bed placement is determined by how much sun it will get during the day, access to a water hose and how much you want to produce. Avoid areas of the lawn where water stands for long periods after a heavy rain because if the area floods you will need higher walls to allow better drainage.

Building materials can be wood, stone, bricks, cinder blocks, and can be as cheap as what is on hand. I

see people offering leftover pavers, cinder blocks and bricks for free on my Nextdoor neighborhood news group if you are willing to pick them up. Consider building one smaller bed for each child and let them plant fast maturing plants like radishes or beans.

Bed design is as simple or as complicated as you want to make it. If this is your first garden, start simple and upgrade later. One reason I like cinder blocks is they can be moved easily so if something happens that requires the bed to be relocated just stack them out of the way and spread the soil in low spots. I have seen beds that range from simple-to-construct wood boards to beds that allow the gardener access to walk inside with an open center and fenced to keep chickens and pets out.

Now that you have decided to give gardening a try, develop a general plan. What is the best location for a garden? How will the raised bed affect mowing? Will the raised bed be shaded by large trees during the morning hours? Can you easily get to the raised bed? What do you want to plant? Consider what vegetables you eat now and look into when they grow best in your area. Contact the Galveston County AgriLife Extension Office to obtain Publication GC-104 (Recommended Vegetable Varieties for Galveston County). This publication lists vegetables for spring and fall gardens as well as dates to plant vegetables in our growing area.

After you have constructed your raised bed, it's time to fill the bed with soil. Depending on how large the bed is, your favorite big box store or garden center can provide bags of soil to fill them or soil yards can provide rose or garden mix that can be hauled home in the back of a truck or trailer. To figure how much soil you will need measure the inside dimensions of the bed and multiply the height times the width times the length to get cubic feet volume. A yard of soil is 27 cubic feet so knowing the volume of the beds will determine how much soil to buy.

Adding a bag of leaf mold is not necessary but it is the best way to encourage microorganisms to help break down the nutrients needed to make your plants happy.

Once you have selected and planted your new garden, make sure to check to ensure that adequate soil moisture is maintained. Stick your finger into the soil to determine if it is moist or dry. With some experience, you will be able to determine soil moisture just by looking at the surface of the soil. Now all that is left to do is water as needed, pull weeds, and wait for the harvest. BUT it is not too early to start planning for a productive home garden and putting to good use the over-abundance of time provided by a self-quarantine.

