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In This Time of Self-Isolation, Start a Garden!

With the coronavirus pandemic putting pressure on local food systems, interest is resurfacing in homeowners starting Victory Gardens in their yards. Victory Gardens, originally called War Gardens, began in the late 1910s as the U.S. entered World War I. Renamed to Victory Gardens in World War II, it was the public's way of easing pressure on food supplies by having American citizens produce most of their own food. At the height of their popularity, there were about 20 million gardens across the country which produced around 40 percent of the Nation's fruit and vegetable supply. Today, gardening is one of the best options for a change of scenery and exercise while still self-isolating to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

Many people have gardens already established, but some people may need to start a new garden from scratch. Begin by deciding what you want to eat. While this is helpful for ensuring that what you grow will be eaten and narrows down the list of plants for your garden, it is important to make sure that you aren't trying to fit a square peg into a round hole and growing fruits and vegetables outside of their preferred growing environments. Plants are usually pretty flexible in the kind of growing conditions they will tolerate, but putting them in their preferred environments will ensure that you get the most bang for your buck. Some fruiting vegetables (peppers, tomatoes, eggplant, melons) and most fruit will require full sun in order to maximize production, whereas leafy vegetables and root crops will tolerate shady conditions better.

Most vegetables are propagated by seed, and the cost of seed can vary depending on your source and the traits the mature plants will have. The most common distinguishing factor between seed is whether it's an heirloom variety or a modern variety. Heirloom varieties of vegetables and fruits are reproduced through open pollination and are at least 50 years old. These varieties often have uniquely colored or patterned produce and are popular among gardeners interested in historical preservation. However, because of their method of reproduction, traits such as disease resistance and germination rates vary from plant to plant. For more uniform growth, yield, and disease resistance, choose modern vegetable varieties.

Annual vegetables are either cool-season or warm-season crops, which describes when they grow and when you can expect produce. Cool-season crops have the benefit of growing in two seasons, although most are traditionally only grown in one. Warm-season seeds usually have a minimum soil temperature before they will germinate, which means that you will need to start seeds indoors during cooler months. All the solanaceous crops – tomatoes, peppers, eggplant and potatoes – have this minimum temperature requirement. Planting dates for all fruits and vegetables can be found in the Kansas Garden Guide, or through your local extension office. We will soon host webinars on all of the steps necessary to start a new vegetable garden.

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