

Sanctuary

MODERN GREEN HOMES

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DAY SPECIAL

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OUTDOORS

Wild gardening

A natural, low-effort approach to
producing food at home

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY Leila Alexandra

Leila Alexandra is a lifelong gardener who has transformed the backyard of her Melbourne rental property into a verdant and productive green wilderness - all with minimal weeding and digging. She shares her philosophy.

Our garden is a haven. Amongst the straight lines and hard surfaces in the city, the wild greenery of our yard offers a place to take a deep breath and remember that we humans are nature too. We have a quarter-acre rental property in the north of Melbourne where we have lived for the past five years. When we moved here it was all lawn; now it grows food for the four of us, and for the birds and garden creatures. We eat seasonally from the garden, growing most of our own vegetables. We also grow some fruit, berries, teas, medicinal plants, and plants for bees, biodiversity, mulch and soil improvement.

At a time when so many people are yearning to grow their own food, I am privileged to have grown up eating from the garden – on an organic farm where my parents planted food forests and created an edible wonderland. Gardening comes naturally to me: I was plant-literate before I could talk. I see this repeating when my toddler asks for fruits by going to plants in the garden and gesturing. For me, there is nothing more rewarding and meaningful than nourishing the body and soul with fresh, healthy, home-grown food.

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With my daughter Tara in the garden (opposite page), and harvesting dinner on a summer evening (below).



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A view of our garden from the house, with carrot flowers in the foreground.

If you are considering productive gardening, I would strongly recommend it, even if you are in a rental property (though it's prudent to get your landlord's permission before making major changes to the garden). Firstly, if you grow annuals (plants that grow, produce seed and die within a year, such as most vegetables) you will get a yield within a few short months, and some fruit trees and berries take only one to three years to start producing fruit. Secondly, you will get to practise and learn and experiment, and gain knowledge you can take to your next garden. Every gardener, no matter how long they have gardened for, will tell you that they are still learning – this is one of the great joys of gardening.

There's a lot to consider when you start growing food – getting started can feel overwhelming. If you've made a start, you might feel like you're always battling the grasses and weeds. Here are some tips I've picked up from my own experience.

BYE BYE GRASS

The first thing to do is completely kill the grass where you want your garden, especially if you have a runner grass like kikuyu or couch. There are different approaches depending on whether you are primarily after an instant garden, a budget garden, or a labour-saving garden. My favourite method is to lay down old carpet, wait four to six months until the grass underneath is dead, and then sow green manures. Green manures are plants that improve the soil by adding organic matter (such as oats and millet) and 'fixing' nitrogen (such as clover and vetch). Before the green manure seeds, 'chop and drop' it for mulch and then plant vegetables. This method takes some time – up to 12 months – but involves very little effort or money and produces the best soil.

If you want an instant garden, lay down two layers of cardboard or a thick layer of newspaper, overlapping at the edge of each piece, and then cover with around five centimetres of compost (ask around for a good quality compost you can plant straight into). Make an edge using wood, bricks, rocks or whatever you have to keep the compost on the garden. Raised beds are fashionable, but I wouldn't bother unless you have trouble bending or your underlying soil is contaminated. If your soil is heavy clay and drainage is an issue, improve the soil with compost and/or green manures.

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My son Mikael with a winter harvest of leafy greens.



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Green manure crops like this one of vetch and oats can be 'chopped and dropped' for mulch, improving the soil.

START SMALL

Start small and gradually expand, so that it's manageable while you are learning – especially if you need to water. If you have runner grasses, keep a barrier of dead grass between the garden and lawn with strips of old carpet – you can cover them in woodchips so they look nice. Every so often, lift the carpet up and check for runners trying to invade the garden.

WATCH CLOSELY AND LEARN

Practise close and regular observation. Let the plants be your teachers. See what they respond to and soon you will learn whether they need more water or more nutrients, whether they prefer more sun or more shade. Learn about vegetable families: this will help you understand their requirements, especially what time of year they grow in your area. Remember that vegetables are 'hungry' and need a lot of nutrients – experiment with applying manure, compost, complete organic slow release fertiliser and blood-and-bone. Get involved in your local gardening community and learn from other gardeners. This could be a community garden, an online group, a food swap or a permaculture or sustainability group. You could even offer to help other gardeners – they will love the help and be glad to teach you at the same time.

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Harvests, including leaves for a 'weed salad' (top left); ladybirds breeding in fennel seed heads (bottom left).

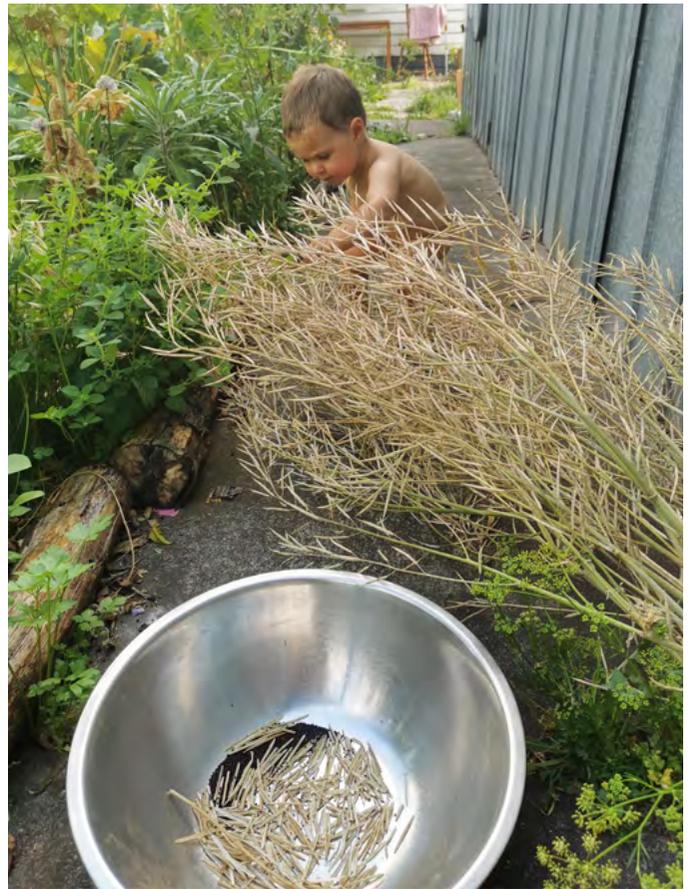


GO WILD

If you want your garden to be low maintenance and don't mind a wild style of garden, consider adopting a 'natural farming' approach. Natural farming was first articulated by Japanese farmer and philosopher Masanobu Fukuoka. Fukuoka claimed that nature is perfect and that all problems arise when humans try to improve on nature. If we hold an image of unadulterated nature in our minds, we will instinctively know what we must, and must not, do. Following this approach, gardening can also be quite a spiritual practice that brings us closer to nature.

See your garden, both above and below the ground, as an ecosystem. Create diversity by planting many different types of plants everywhere. Ask for cuttings and divisions of perennial plants (plants that live for many years) from other gardeners. Mix many types of seed together and throw them randomly through the garden. The results are astounding – the strongest plants will emerge where the conditions are right.

See all living things, including weeds (many of which are edible) and garden creatures, as friends that live together in harmony. The philosophy is that only weak plants will be damaged by 'pests and disease' (although in practice, some pests and disease are seriously problematic and do require treatment). Let plants live out their life, sow seed, and decompose in situ. As they are dying and decomposing they return nutrients to the soil, protect the soil from the sun and rain, and create habitat and food for small creatures. Many vegetables will happily self-sow. Try different varieties, as some will be more suited to self-sowing in your conditions. Practise minimal soil disturbance (don't dig) and keep the surface covered (using mulches, including living mulches). Use green manures, deep-rooted perennials and nitrogen-fixing plants to feed the soil, improve soil structure, and increase the organic matter. Healthy soil is the key to a thriving garden.



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Tara helping with the mustard seed harvest, and foraging for raspberries.

GIVE IT A GO

Gardening can sometimes feel like one failure after the next! However, if we adjust our perspective and instead see each attempt as an experiment, we can appreciate our garden in whatever state it's in, and as rich source material for contemplation. By tuning in and spending time amongst plants as they change with nature's cycles, we can start to see beauty in the most unexpected places – amongst dying foliage or overgrown weeds. And the payoff in terms of food for your family can be enormous too. I hope this article has sparked some inspiration for you and wish you all the best on your natural gardening journey.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leila Alexandra works to create positive change by living a slow and simple life, particularly growing and cooking wholesome food. She inspires and supports others to do the same through her business Barefoot Food Gardens, which offers consultations, tours, workshops and storytelling. www.barefootfoodgardens.org