PLANT YOUR GARDEN

From rambling climbers to majestic bamboos, this chapter offers gorgeous plants to suit every garden, regardless of soil conditions, exposure, or garden size. Follow the planting groupings to create year-round interest—from naturalized spring bulbs and wildflower summer meadows to fall berries and colorful winter stems.

PLANT FAMILIES

Plants in each of the major groups have different characteristics and behave in different ways, so it is useful to have a basic understanding of how they look and perform before creating a planting design for your garden.

TREES

These large woody evergreen or deciduous plants usually produce a canopy of leafy stems above a single clear trunk, although many conifers have branches from top to bottom. Trees lend height to designs and provide shade in sunny sites, but position them carefully as they are difficult to move once established.

SHRUBS

Together with trees, shrubs form the backbone of a garden design. They can be evergreen or deciduous and come in many different shapes and sizes, but all are characterized by a permanent framework of woody stems. Grown for their attractive foliage, flowers, and stems, shrubs provide color and interest all year.

PERENNIALS

Living for three years or more, a few perennials are evergreen, but the majority are deciduous, their top growth dying down in winter and reappearing in spring. Their stems are generally non-woody, and many multiply to form large clumps. They are mainly grown for their flowers; some also provide foliage interest.

GRASSES AND BAMBOOS

Grasses grow from the stem and leaf bases and produce straplike foliage. They encompass annuals and evergreen and deciduous perennials, and their flowers are wind-pollinated. Sedges are very similar to grasses, but tend to be evergreen, while bamboos are simply grasses with woody stems.

BULBS

A bulb is a plant with a food-storage organ that sustains its growth when the optimal conditions prevail. The group includes true bulbs, such as daffodils; corms, such as crocuses; tubers, including dahlias; and rhizomes, like irises (*see p.160*). They are valued for their colorful flowers; some also have decorative foliage.

ANNUALS AND BIENNIALS

Plants that grow, flower, and die within one year are known as annuals; those that produce stems and leaves in their first year, then bloom and die in the second year are biennials. The flowers of hardy types are often used to brighten up borders, while tender plants that flower all summer are ideal for pots.

CLIMBERS

These plants climb host plants or structures to search out sufficient light. The group includes evergreen and deciduous forms; some have soft stems while others are woody. Most need a framework of trellis or wires, or a host tree or shrub to climb, and cling via a number of different methods (*see p.144*).

WATER PLANTS

Plants that live in and around water comprise four main categories: oxygenators help to keep the water clear by starving out weeds; aquatics, such as water lilies, root at the bottom of a pond; marginals live at the water's edge; and bog plants typically grow in the moist soil that surrounds a natural pond.

PLANTING FOR A LIFESTYLE

The plants you choose and the way that they are used have an impact on the time you will need to spend caring for them. If you want an easy-care garden, opt for robust, hardy plants that perform year after year and require little maintenance.

High maintenance

If you enjoy being outside and tending your garden, you can choose from a wide range of planting designs and garden styles. Include a lawn if you don't mind mowing, and try tender plants that require tending in a warm greenhouse or room indoors over the winter. Ambitious gardeners can also sow annuals each year in beds and containers, and plant tender summer bulbs, such as dahlias and gladioli, which need lifting and bringing indoors in the fall. Trees with flowers that require frost protection, such as magnolias, are also options if you are happy to cover them with fabric when temperatures dip.

Moderate care

Those who enjoy gardening but only have limited time can still maintain a lawn and perhaps a few large container displays, as well as trees, shrubs, and perennials in beds and borders. Any plant in a pot needs more nurturing than one in the ground, where it has access to greater reserves of nutrients and water, but large containers require watering less frequently because they hold greater volumes of soil. You could also plant climbers like clematis that only need to be pruned annually, and some hardy bulbs, which are left in place in the winter.

Low maintenance

Small trees and hardy shrubs make life easy for gardeners. Most require very little maintenance if planted in the right conditions. Shrubs may need trimming back every couple of years, while trees shouldn't require much pruning, except to remove dead or diseased stems. Hardy perennials are also easy; just cut back the dead growth in the fall or early spring.

High-maintenance gardens filled with annuals, tender summer bulbs, and lawns require constant care in the growing season.

Low-maintenance gardens include easy-care perennials, such as sedums, grasses, and shrubs. Gravel is a low-maintenance surface option.

Selecting and planting perennials

Perennials provide spectacular flowering displays for many months of the year. Although some tall types require staking, most will look after themselves, reappearing year after year following their winter rest.

Plant perennials in groups of three or more. Buy mature plants or young "plugs," which are more cost effective for bulk purchases.

STAGGERING VARIETY

From the towering *Eupatorium purpureum* to the low, sprawling *Campanula poscharskyana*, there is a perennial for any area or planting design. They are available in a huge range of colors and shades, making it difficult to decide which to plant. Begin by assessing your site and soil and selecting those that do best in these conditions (*see p.66*). Next, map out your border or planting area, and assign plants according to their size and stature. Generally, lofty plants provide a backdrop to medium-sized and ground-hugging perennials, but remember that a few, such as the ever-popular *Verbena bonariensis* and elegant *Dierama pulcherrimum*, can be planted toward the front of a design because they have slender stems and an airy, see-through structure. Finally, take your pick from the wide range of flower colors and foliage varieties to complete your design.

Spectacular blooms

For borders bursting with color, include a few flamboyant blooms. Try peonies, which boast large flowers prized for their ruffles of delicate petals in pink, red, or white. Lupines join the peonies in early summer and produce eye-catching cones of small flowers in many hues, while in midsummer, the towering spires of delphiniums are hard to beat with their spikes of open flowers in shades of blue, purple, pink, and white. Also add a selection of oriental poppies. Although their sumptuous blooms are relatively short-lived, the decorative seedheads that follow extend their interest.

PLANNING A LONG SEASON OF INTEREST

There are perennials for all seasons, starting with hellebores (*top left*), which flower between late winter and mid-spring. Next are the dainty forget-me-not-like blooms of *Brunnera,* and dancing flowers of *Epimedium* and *Dicentra spectabilis*, all of which prefer some shade, followed later in spring by aquilegias in a variety of shapes and colors. A host of geraniums and vibrant geums (*top right*) then appear in the early summer.

For dramatic color from late summer to fall, opt for blue or red asters (*bottom left*) and golden rudbeckias, toned down with the white daisies of *Leucanthemum*. In the fall, try the knee-high, sun-loving *Ajania pacifica* (*bottom right*), which bears yellow buttonlike flowers surrounded by beautiful silver-edged lobed foliage. The evergreens then come into their own in the winter, with round-leaf bergenias, grassy *Libertia*, and colorful heucheras leading the show.

Helleborus x *hybridus* 'Pluto'

Geum coccineum

Aster amellus 'Rosa Erfüllung'

Ajania pacifica

Planting depths explained

Most perennials should be planted at the same depth as they were when in their original pots, but exceptions include those that dislike damp soil around their stems, such as *Verbascum*, *Sisyrinchium*, and *Sedum*. Plant these 1–1½in (2–3cm) above the surface, and pull up the soil around the root ball to encourage water to drain off. Moisture-loving plants, including hostas, prefer to be planted more deeply so that their roots are never exposed to the dry conditions nearer the surface.

GARDEN WISDOM

PLANTING A PERENNIAL

To prepare the ground for planting, dig up the soil to aerate it, reduce compaction, and remove any weeds. Then dig in some organic matter, such as well-rotted manure or compost. If your soil is particularly heavy, you may also need to add some horticultural grit to prevent waterlogging (*see p.66*). Most perennials are planted in the early fall or spring; more tender types or those that dislike cold, wet conditions, such as *Verbena bonariensis*, are best planted in the spring, allowing them a full growing season to establish before winter.

1 Dig a hole twice as wide as the plant pot and a little deeper. Set the plant in the hole, and check that it will be at about the same depth when planted as it was in its original pot.

2 Fork the bottom of the hole to loosen any compacted soil. Water the plant well, then slip it out of its pot. Gently tease out any circling roots from the rootball. Place the plant back into the hole.

3 Incorporate some controlled-release granular fertilizer, as directed on the packaging, into the excavated soil. Fill in around the root ball with it, firming it down with your fingers.

4 Water the plant well, and apply an organic mulch of compost or well-rotted manure. Lay gravel around plants that like their stems kept dry, such as achilleas, stachys, and sedums.

A YEAR IN THE VEGETABLE GARDEN

The vegetable garden is a busy place for many months of the year, starting with ground preparation and sowing seeds in spring, followed by crop care and harvesting through summer and into fall. Use the winter months for clearing up, digging beds, and planning for the year ahead.

SPRING

Preparation

- **In early spring**, give your greenhouse a really good cleaning. Remove any bubble plastic if the frost is over, and clean all the window panes—inside and out. Replace any cracked panes, and check that automatic vents are working. Paint any wood panels, and wash down the greenhouse floor and shelves with water and disinfectant.
- **Turn over the soil** to ensure that it has not become compacted—try to avoid stepping on it if possible.
- **Put supports in place** for climbing plants; construct wigwams from bamboo canes to support climbing beans.
- **In late spring**, prepare beds for early summer sowings.

Sowing seeds

- **Sow vegetable seed** in a greenhouse to give both hardy and tender varieties a headstart. Begin with eggplant, beets, carrots, cucumber, peppers, and tomatoes.
- **Sow hardy vegetable seed** such as broad beans, Brussels sprouts, cabbages, kale, leeks, lettuce, peas, and parsnips under cloches outdoors in early spring.
- **In mid-spring**, sow seeds such as green and runner beans, sweet corn, beets, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, spinach, and Swiss chard directly in the ground, and cover with cloches if frost threatens.
- **In late spring**, sow zucchini and squash seeds under cover in a greenhouse.

Planting out

- **In early spring**, plant out early seed potatoes, garlic, and onion and shallot sets.
- **In mid-spring**, plant out midseason potatoes and globe and Jerusalem artichokes.
- **Lift and pot on seedlings** of leeks, eggplant, and early summer cabbages, and harden off those that will be planted outside. Use cloches or cold frames to protect vulnerable seedlings from frost or pests.
- **In late spring**, harden off, and plant out seedlings, such as peppers, tomatoes, celery, and Brussels sprouts.
- **Begin to transplant well-developed seedlings** of cauliflower, zucchini, and Florence fennel, and provide them with protection from cloches as necessary.
- **Plant out** store-bought, pre-grown herbs in late spring.

Routine care

- **Remove and dispose of weeds** as they appear.
- **Earth up potatoes** to protect them from frost.
- **Put fabric on young plants** on chilly nights.
- **Water plants regularly**, especially those in containers.
- **Top-dress plants** in containers if necessary.

Harvesting

- **Harvest cabbage**, cauliflower, kale, purple sprouting broccoli, Swiss chard, asparagus, broad beans, peas, salads, herbs, and green onions.

Other tasks

- **Prune perennial herbs,** such as rosemary, thyme, and sage. Divide clump-forming herbs and replant if necessary.

Sow carrot seed under cover for a headstart.

SUMMER

Sowing seeds

▪ **In early summer**, sow beets, carrots, zucchini, outdoor cucumbers, beans, herbs, peas, radishes, squash, rutabagas, Swiss chard, and turnips. Continue to sow successionally over the summer months, and sow late-summer sowings for fall and winter harvests.

Planting out

▪ **Transplant all indoor-sown seedlings** to their final outside positions in early summer.

Routine care

▪ **Feed and water plants regularly**, particularly as the weather warms up and the plants begin to bear a crop.
▪ **Keep plants well weeded,** and clear beds of debris.
▪ **Tie in climbing plants,** and nip off their topmost shoots to encourage bushy growth.
▪ **Remove sideshoots** from cordon tomatoes.
▪ **Earth up** potatoes and leeks.

Harvesting

▪ **Harvest crops** such as beets, broad beans, cabbage, cauliflower, zucchini, cucumbers, artichokes, lettuce, peas, garlic, onions, tomatoes, eggplant, sweet corn, peppers, potatoes, carrots, and Swiss chard. Harvest fruits as they appear, as this will encourage crops, such as zucchini and peppers, to produce a greater yield.

Other tasks

▪ **Feed, weed, and water greenhouse plants** regularly, and ventilate on hot days to prevent temperatures from rising too high. As summer goes on, shade the greenhouse by applying whitewash to the glass, and on very hot days damp down the floor by splashing water on it. Remove pests and diseases on sight, or buy biological controls.

FALL AND WINTER

Sowing seeds

▪ **In early fall**, sow spinach and Swiss chard under cover, and transplant spring cabbages outside. Sow hardy lettuce varieties for winter and early spring picking.
▪ **Plant out fall garlic** and hardy onion sets, and sow broad beans, carrots, and peas to overwinter.
▪ **From midwinter onward**, sow hardy crops under cover ready for planting out in early spring, such as broad beans, early carrots and cauliflower, leeks, lettuce, onions, shallots, spring cabbages, and peas.

Harvesting

▪ **Harvest the last crops** of many vegetables, including beets, carrots, chiles, cucumbers, cabbages, green and runner beans, peppers, potatoes, sweet corn, tomatoes, squash, and turnips. Kale, leeks, and parsnips should also be ready for harvesting as required, but can be left to stand in the ground for longer.
▪ **Over the winter**, continue to harvest Brussels sprouts, cabbage, kale, parsnips, and leeks.

Other tasks

▪ **In fall**, remove any spent plants, and give the greenhouse a good cleaning after the busy summer months before bringing in the plants that will overwinter there.
▪ **Tidy the garden**, removing all dead plants—if the debris is disease-free, transfer it to the compost heap.
▪ **Gather up any fallen leaves** to use to make leaf mold.
▪ **Dig well-rotted manure** into beds and borders.
▪ **Plan your crop rotation,** and order seeds, onion sets, seed potatoes, and bare root plants. Chit your seed potatoes.
▪ **If the greenhouse is not heated**, line the windows with bubble plastic to raise the temperature and keep out frost. Check plants for pests and diseases, and ensure their compost is slightly moist but not wet.

Hand weed vegetable beds to avoid damaging crops.

Collect fallen leaves for leaf mold.

Harvest sprouts ready for Christmas.

Tomatoes

Tomatoes are a popular crop, producing summer crops in a wide variety of colors, shapes, and sizes. Depending on the type, they can be trained as cordons, left as bushes, or allowed to cascade from hanging baskets.

	SPRING	SUMMER	FALL	WINTER
SOW/PLANT				
HARVEST				

Harvest fruits when fully ripe and evenly colored.

HOW TO GROW

In cool areas tomatoes crop better in a greenhouse, but there are varieties to grow outside. Sow seeds in modules or small pots indoors at a temperature of 64–70°F (18–21°C) in the early spring. Pot into individual pots, 3in (8cm) in diameter when large enough to handle, and harden off outdoor varieties once all threat of frost has passed.

Plant outside into pots or growing bags or into fertile, well-drained soil 30in (75cm) apart. If planting into greenhouse borders, space plants 2ft (60cm) apart. Provide support, water regularly, and feed weekly once the first flowers appear in the summer. Remove yellowing leaves as they appear, and pinch off cordon varieties as needed.

TYPES AVAILABLE

Beefsteak tomatoes produce the largest fruit but can be slow to ripen and give fewer fruit per plant than other types. Best grown under cover.

Cherry tomatoes are very free-fruiting, producing long chains of berry-sized fruit. Some varieties are suitable for patio containers.

Plum tomatoes have larger, fleshier fruit than cherry types and a rich flavor. There are varieties suitable to grow inside or outdoors.

Heirloom varieties produce tasty fruit in a variety of shapes and colors, including striped. Most crop best under cover.

VARIETIES TO TRY

Tomatoes have either a bush (B), cordon (C), or tumbling (*see facing page*).

Cherry tomatoes:
'Balconi Red' (tumbling) ■ 'Chocolate Cherry' (C) ■ 'Gardener's Delight' (B or C) 'Gold Nugget' (C) ■ 'Sungold' (C) 'Tumbling Tom' (tumbling)

Plum tomatoes:
'Black Plum' (C) ■ 'Moneymaker' (B) 'Roma' (B) ■ 'Summer Sweet' (C)

Beefsteak tomatoes:
'Big Red F1' (C) ■ 'Beefeater' (C) 'Marmande' (C) ■ 'Pink Wonder' (C)

Heirloom tomatoes:
'Green Sausage' (B) ■ 'Purple Russian' (C) 'Antique Roman' (C) ■ 'Tigerella' (C)

Use tall garden canes or flexible strings for indoor cordon tomatoes.

Training and support

Bush tomatoes, which are usually grown outdoors, are the simplest to support and train; insert canes around the plants, and tie in the branches to help take the weight of the developing fruit. The bigger the crop, the more canes needed.

Cordon tomatoes are trained as single stems and are usually grown under cover. To provide support, insert tall canes next to each plant, avoiding the roots, and tie in the stems at intervals as they grow. If using growing bags, attach the canes to the greenhouse frame to give extra support. Check and tie in plants every week, and pinch off the main growing tips when they reach the top of the supports. Stop outdoor cordons once they have produced 4–5 fruit trusses.

To encourage cordons to fruit and to limit their size, pinch off the sideshoots that develop in the joints between the leaves or flower trusses and the main stems. If these grow, they waste plant energy on unwanted growth and also shade the fruit, preventing it from ripening. Bush and tumbling varieties do not need to be pinched off. As the plants grow, remove the leaves below the lowest truss of ripening fruit to promote airflow and reduce disease.

Growing in containers

Tomatoes grow best in containers filled with new compost or in growing bags, since this reduces the risk of soil-borne disease. It also allows you to place plants in a warm and sheltered location.

If growing in pots, place rocks in the base of a 15in (38cm) diameter pot, fill it with good-quality peat-based compost, and plant one plant in each. If planting into a standard growing bag, make drainage holes in the bottom first, then plant 2–3 tomatoes in each. To grow tumbling tomatoes in hanging baskets, line the basket with pierced plastic to help retain moisture, and fill with compost. Position the plants near the edge so the stems can tumble over the sides. Hang the basket in a sheltered spot out of the wind, and water every day.

► **Tumbling tomatoes** are ideal for small spaces. Baskets can be planted decoratively with flowers.

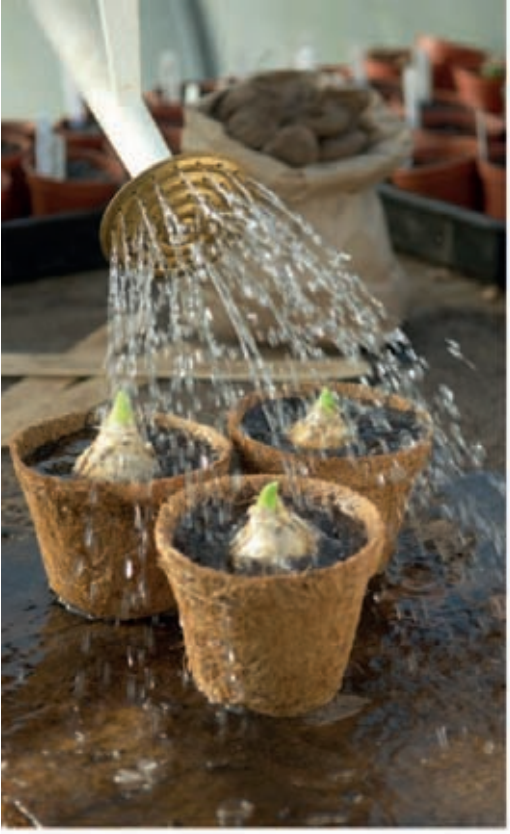
WATCH OUT FOR...

Tomato blight causes the leaves to discolor, dead tissue to develop on the stems, and the fruit to rot. Apply fungicide as a precaution, remove infected leaves, and rotate crops.

Blossom end rot causes the base of the fruit to turn yellow and brown, then rot and drop off. It is commonly caused by erratic watering; destroy infected fruit, and water regularly. (*For more pests and diseases advice, see pp.356–369.*)

Feeding and watering

Feeding and watering are the most important things to get right. Water regularly and evenly; allowing the plants to dry out then occasionally soaking them causes fruit to split, as well as blossom end rot (*see left*). Tomatoes are hungry plants and need weekly feeding with a high-potash liquid fertilizer as soon as the plants flower, and twice weekly once the first fruits appear. Follow the instructions on the packet. Liquid organic feeds are also available.



Water individual pots regularly in dry conditions and when growing under cover. Use a rose to prevent displacing soil in small pots.

REVIVE A WILTED BASKET

If a summer hanging basket begins to flag, plunge it into a sink, bowl, or bucket of water. Once the compost is moist, remove it, and let excess water drain away. Replace dead plants, and trim damaged growth.

Restore baskets by immersing them in water and leaving them there for a little while. They will draw the moisture they need through their roots.

HOW TO WATER

To ensure your plants thrive rather than wilt or struggle to survive, it's important to water them efficiently. If you understand the needs of different plants, you can use techniques that deliver water where it is needed most.

EFFICIENT WATERING

Adequate water and sound watering methods are essential for healthy plant growth. Poor watering does more harm than good: drenching plants with abandon can leave roots exposed if compost is washed away or soil is eroded by the fast flow of water. If there is puddling on the soil surface and the ground becomes waterlogged, roots may rot.

Water is a valuable resource, both in environmental terms and for your wallet if you are on a water meter. The aim of effective watering techniques is to reduce the need for watering and use water effectively and economically when you do water.

To reduce moisture loss through evaporation, water plants in the cool of the evening or early in the morning. This ensures water reaches roots with minimum waste. Timing is critical. Although it may occasionally be necessary to water in the heat of day, avoid it if you can.

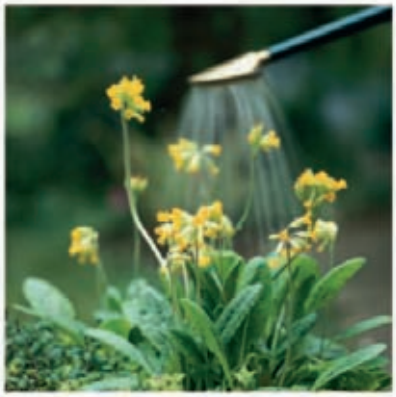
If beds, borders, or vegetable patches need watering, avoid the temptation to freshen them up by sprinkling water lightly over a wide area. Light watering won't penetrate the soil and may encourage roots to develop closer to the surface. This makes plants more susceptible to drought and in need of repeated watering. Instead, give individual plants a thorough soaking by watering directly above the root area. Let the water soak in before applying more.

Needy plants

Start with newly planted seedlings, then established plants. Close attention needs to be paid to newly sown grass or recently planted beds and borders, plants in pots, and most fruit and vegetables. Elsewhere,

To reduce water waste, water directly at the base of individual plants so that moisture gets straight to the roots.

Thoroughly water young plants individually as you transplant them. Continue to water regularly while they become established.



Get up early and water plants at the very beginning of the day when the sun is not at its hottest—this way you'll lose less to evaporation.

keep an eye on plants growing under trees and hedges along with those planted under an overhang or trained against a wall or fence. Generally, established plants growing in soil do not require watering, but their growth is usually improved by watering in drought conditions.

Watering baskets and containers

Rainfall alone will not keep hanging baskets and containers moist; the foliage will often act like an umbrella, keeping the compost beneath dry. To ensure plants in pots thrive, water regularly and thoroughly, especially in the summer. When planting containers, leave a 2in (5cm) gap between the top of the compost and the lip of the container to act as a well for water to gather and then filter down to the roots of the plants.

To water baskets, remove the rose from a watering can, and pour water slowly beneath the foliage, directly onto the compost. Place trays under patio containers to act as a reservoir in summer. Although plants in pots are most demanding while in active growth, they also need occasional watering in dry spells over the winter.

EASY WATERING

Watering cans are probably the only watering equipment you'll need for a small garden, but a hose is a better option for a large plot and will make life easier. Instead of attaching a hose to a tap indoors, install an outdoor tap (new taps must legally be fitted with a device that prevents contaminated water being siphoned back into the drinking-water supply). There are many devices available to improve the efficiency of watering and make life easier; a long-handled lance can be fitted to a hose to reach individual plants, or a timer can be fitted to a tap to deliver water via a seep hose or an automatic irrigation system.

Sprinklers can be used to water large areas without your having to hold the hose. Use them at cool times of the day to prevent evaporation before the water reaches the roots.

Drip feeders along a length of hose can be used to water at intervals along a bed or in pots.

Low-level watering systems attached to buried hoses will deliver water close to the roots.

Garden hoses will avoid a lot of time spent carrying watering cans around the garden.

Timer systems enable you to water at optimal times of day, even when you are not around.

Seep hoses on the soil surface or buried around perennials put water where plants need it.

Extended watering heads mean you can water plants directly from a distance.

Soluble fertilizer is easy to apply to plants and can be mixed and applied with a watering can. Check the packet for dilution rates first.

FEEDING FACTS

It's important to get feeding just right. Too little results in weak growth, while too much promotes soft sappy shoots that attract the attention of aphids, become vulnerable to frost damage, and may need support.

A careful look at a plant should tell you if it is lacking an essential nutrient. Leaves that yellow at the edges and between the veins show signs of iron deficiency.

HOW TO FEED

Ensure your garden is full of flourishing plants by providing them with the correct nutrients as and when they need them. Get the feeding right, and they will respond with healthy leaf, fruit, and flower growth.

FEEDING TECHNIQUES

There is a wide range of plant foods available, from manure and compost to liquid, granular, and powdered feeds. Some are inorganic—man-made; others are organic—derived from plant and animal waste.

Some feeds have equal proportions of the three major plant nutrients (nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium, represented by the symbols N, P, and K), which promote all-around healthy growth. Others have a higher percentage of a particular nutrient; these are designed to encourage root, foliage, or fruit development. Specialty granular and liquid feeds are also available for specific plants or purposes, like orchid, tomato, citrus, and bonsai fertilizer, and ericaceous and sequestered iron fertilizers.

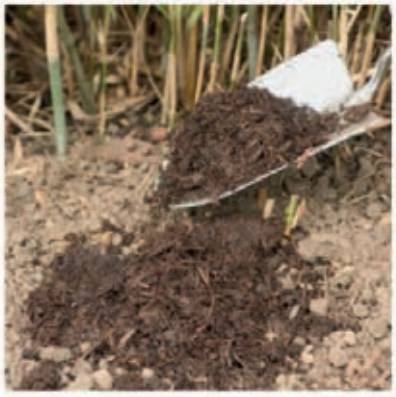
Dry fertilizers

Granular or powdered fertilizers are mainly used to feed established plants in beds or borders or to boost soil fertility before planting. Apply in early spring, scattering it around established trees, shrubs, and perennials, or working it in to broad patches of soil. If you need to treat a large area, divide it into square yards (metres) with canes for more even distribution. Always wear gloves when handling dry fertilizer.

Slow-release fertilizers

Added to the soil or mixed into compost in powder or granular form, these fertilizers feed plants gradually over a period of time. They are particularly useful if you are short on time, as only one application is needed. Follow

Granular fertilizer can be scattered on the soil around the base of the plant and will deliver nutrients straight to roots as it is washed in.



Bulky organic fertilizers are invaluable, feeding plants by boosting the soil's nutrients while also improving its structure.

the instructions given on the packet for the correct application, and wear suitable gloves when handling the fertilizer.

Liquid fertilizers

Fast-acting liquid fertilizers can be applied to soil or compost, once diluted, or added to a sprayer and used as a foliar feed—this is useful if a plant is suffering from a nutrient deficiency and needs a pick-me-up. Liquid feeds that are high in potash are ideal for improving yields of fruits and vegetables, such as tomatoes, peppers, and strawberries, or to extend the display of flowering annuals. Kelp is a good tonic for garden plants. Dilute concentrated feeds according to the packet instructions, or use the more expensive ready-mixed feeds.

Manure

Simply digging bulky farmyard manure into the soil improves its structure and water-retaining ability, encourages beneficial organisms, and adds nutrients. Ideally, apply well-rotted manure in the fall, either as a 2–3in (5–7.5cm) deep mulch to established beds, or dug into large areas being prepared for planting in the spring.

Liquid fertilizers act quickly once diluted in water, and when applied to the soil or leaves, will soon revitalize flagging plants.

Plants in pots need more feeding than those in the ground. An occasional application of granular feed in the compost helps them thrive.

Well-rotted manure is best applied in the fall so it can gradually rot into the soil over the winter, making the soil ready for spring growth.

Making garden compost

Making your own compost is easy and makes sense economically and environmentally too. Fill your bins with a mixture of green and brown waste. Green waste includes lawn clippings, annual weeds, plant trimmings, and other soft material that rots down quickly, bringing nitrogen and moisture to the mix. Shredded cardboard and dead leaves are good brown-waste materials—they are dry, rich in carbon, and give compost structure. Green materials rot to a smelly sludge, but brown materials balance out the compost to produce a rich, crumbly texture. Do not add animal waste, meat, cooked food, diseased plants, or fresh perennial weeds.

1 Choose a compost bin to suit your needs, and position it in the garden where it can be easily accessed and tended.

2 Add uncooked kitchen waste as well as healthy plant materials and grass clippings to your heap. Pick out any perennial weeds or diseased plants.

3 Build up your heap in layers of green and brown material to blend the materials and give the finished compost a good structure and texture.

4 Turn the heap periodically with a garden fork to mix up all the rotting materials and aerate the heap; this also helps the mixture compost more thoroughly.