

# Five Ways to Get the Most Bang for Your Buck from a Small Garden

by Drew Housman, by Simple Dollar, 2017

There are many green-thumbed city dwellers who have access to small yards and community garden plots, or who even make do with windowsills. Can these folks get quality produce — along with a good bang for their buck – if they grow their own food?

We'll explore that question with help from Erik Groszyk, a professional urban farmer in New York who works at the farming startup Square Roots.

## 1. Start Slow

Erik suggests a would-be urban gardener start out in a way that might seem counterintuitive at first: by doing nothing. Well, nothing in terms of planting. When you have a smaller space to work with, location is key, so you're going to want to take the time to pick the perfect spot to place your plants. Erik recommends at least a week spent simply observing different conditions. Rushing into something and then having to backtrack ensures you'll waste money.

The most important thing is to “note the position of the sun and what areas get the most light,” Erik says. “If you can understand the conditions of your garden, and choose crops that thrive in those conditions, you're setting yourself up for success.” He suggests putting your plants in an area that gets a minimum of five to six hours of direct sunlight per day, and he recommends the average city dweller start with a five-foot by five-foot plot or raised garden bed.

## 2. Stick to the Most Efficient Basics

It's best to stick with simple staples that are known to be cost-effective and low maintenance.

The National Garden Bureau [maintains a list of crops that have been rated based on overall efficiency](#). The Bureau determines this by looking at total yield per square foot, average value per pound, and length of time in the garden. The top five items on the list are **tomatoes, onions, lettuce, turnips, and squash**.

I ran that list by Erik, and he mostly agreed, but also thought a few more “super productive” plants could easily be at the top of the list — including **strawberries, kale, herbs, and eggplant**.

These might be good crops to start with. Of course, what grows well will vary by region, and you should monitor the local prices of various items to make sure you're growing plants that will save you money over going to the store. (It's also important to grow vegetables that you and your family actually want to eat and feel comfortable cooking with.)

## 3. Remember That Time Is Money

Erik noted that in order to maximize your returns, you'll want to plant crops that can be harvested quickly. “Time to maturity is key,” he said. “The shorter this window, the more times you can plant that type of plant in a limited season.”

For example, if you're a potato addict like myself, you might be interested in growing your own potatoes. But, those spuds take a long time to mature and can be labor intensive for a rookie.

If you really want to grow a root vegetable, turnips would be a better bet. Erik explained why they rank so high on the efficiency list: "A turnip will mature in 30 to 50 days, depending on the variety. They're also cold-tolerant, so you can start them early and grow them late into the season. You might be able to get six or more successions of that crop in a single year!"

Salad greens are another space where you can accrue considerable savings. Consider that pre-washed grocery store lettuce can easily run you \$5 for a 10-ounce bag where I live. That's enough for a couple of salads; I tend to eat a salad per day. It gets expensive.

Lettuce (No. 3 on the NGA efficiency list) is easy to grow, even in low-light conditions. A few dollars worth of seeds should provide you with a steady supply of salad greens for five to six months out of the year, depending on where you live.

On the fruit front, raspberries are a good, low-maintenance option to try out. They go for a ridiculous \$5 per pint on average, so if you eat a lot of them, it adds up fast. Erik had great success with his recent harvest, planting two-inch tall raspberry plants that turned into six-foot, fruit-bearing behemoths by the end of the year. Even better, horticulturist Sue Sanders points out that raspberries can be grown in containers on a sunny deck or patio, as long as the container is at least 24 inches in diameter.

#### **4. Think Holistically**

There are certain pairs of plants that traditionally grow very well together in confined spaces. They have a symbiotic relationship, which means the plants help each other out, and thus require less inputs from the farmer. This means less time spent monitoring your garden, which is key for a busy urbanite.

Erik points out tomato and basil as being the classic example of such a symbiotic system. "Tomatoes get tall and provide shade to the basil, which doesn't always do well in direct sun. And the strong scent of basil will disguise tomato plants from pests," he says. "When working in a tight space, it's important to utilize these types of beneficial relationships."

Building on that, keep in mind that crops like turnips, beets, and carrots have greens attached to them. Even though people like myself tend to discard those slightly unsavory looking greens when I buy carrots at the store, there's no reason they can't be eaten. Using every part of the crop will improve your haul and further drive down your produce bill. Plus, they can liven up your meals. Erik feels that carrot greens in particular "make an awesome salad."

#### **5. Use All Your Space**

You might not have enough square footage for a traditional garden, but that shouldn't hinder you from growing food. "Windowsills can be good spots to grow if you get adequate light," Erik

says. “Leafy greens and herbs tend to need much less light than fruiting veggies like tomatoes and cucumbers.”

Plus, herbs are big-time money savers. Thyme, rosemary, and basil are relatively easy to grow and cost a pretty penny in the store. At my local co-op food store, very small bags of each of those go for \$2 to \$4 a pop. I cook with those herbs on a very regular basis, and can easily spend \$20 to \$30 dollars a month on herbs alone. Reducing that cost to essentially zero would save me hundreds of dollars over the course of the year.

## **Summing Up**

With a bit of determination, flexibility, and foresight, anyone can create a cost-effective garden, even in tight urban quarters. And, according to Erik, it shouldn’t take you all that much time. He thinks that “a well-organized and thoughtfully planned garden can require less than five hours of work a week after the initial setup.”

So, with as little space as a sunny windowsill and five hours a week, you can start to accrue significant savings over store-bought food. Sounds like a good deal to me.