



TakeCharge

WELCOA'S SELF-CARE BULLETIN



PLANTS: PARTNERS IN HEALTH?

Vegetables, Fruits, Herbs, and You

Is there anything more delicious and nutritious than vine-ripened tomatoes, just-harvested peaches and corn, or fresh herbs and spices? Spring isn't too far off, so growing your own edible plants—whether in a backyard garden or a few pots on your windowsill—can be fun, rewarding, and healthful. If you share your garden's bounty with friends and neighbors, you might even expand your social connections and spread the health around.

“Gardening has many health benefits. It allows you to get outside, get active, and sit less, which might help to reduce stress,” says Dr. Philip Smith, a life-long gardener who oversees obesity research at NIH. “Gardening can also help to improve

your diet if you eat more fruits and vegetables. They're especially delicious, with a more intense flavor, when ripe and freshly picked.”

Fruits and vegetables are packed with fiber and essential vitamins and minerals. Research has shown that eating fruits and vegetables as part of an overall healthy diet can reduce your risk for long-term diseases, such as heart disease, stroke, and some types of cancer. The fiber in fruits and vegetables can help relieve constipation and normalize your bowel movements.

Fruits and vegetables may also help reduce your calorie intake—especially if they're replacing high-calorie, high-fat foods—to help you

control your weight. Herbs can add rich and interesting flavors to your meals without adding calories.

THE MANY OTHER BENEFITS OF GARDENING

Gardening might enhance your mental health as well. Some studies have found that being physically active in natural environments—or even simple exposure to nature—can improve mood, reduce anxiety, and enhance self-esteem. “Growing your own vegetables and digging into the dirt can increase physical activity and give one a feeling of well-being and a sense of connection to the Earth,” Smith says.

Children can also benefit from

growing and caring for edible plants. Some studies have found that kids involved with gardening programs tend to make healthier food choices, eat more fruits and vegetables, and have improved social skills.

“Gardening can help little children learn about growing and caring for things. They may find that they enjoy eating the fruits and vegetables they’ve grown themselves. And they may like eating the foods they know are good for them,” Smith says. “Adults, too, often find they appreciate the many delicious tastes of fruits and vegetables that come fresh from the garden.”

When choosing vegetables, eat an assortment of colors and types every day. Broccoli, spinach, collard greens, kale, and other dark leafy greens are good choices. You might also choose red and orange vegetables, such as tomatoes, carrots, sweet potatoes, or red peppers. Many of these are easy to grow at home.

The many nutrients in fruits and vegetables are essential to good health. If you’re taking certain medications, though,

you need to be aware that some plant-based products can interfere with how certain medicines work. For instance, grapefruit can interact with certain drugs—including some cholesterol, blood pressure, and allergy drugs—and lead to serious side effects.

Many types of herbs can also interact dangerously with certain medications. But these problems are much more likely when herbs are taken as supplements.

If you think you don’t have space for a backyard garden, think again. “Some vegetables like carrots, lettuce, kale, and hot peppers don’t require much space,” says Smith. These can be grown in pots or small gardens. “You can also try growing hanger tomatoes, which can be suspended from your deck or porch,” Smith says.

But no matter where you get them—whether from your own back yard, a farmer’s market, or a store—make sure you and your family eat plenty of fruits and vegetables every day.

SAFETY TIPS FOR GARDENERS

- Wear gloves to avoid skin rashes, cuts, and contaminants.
- Keep harmful chemicals, tools, and equipment out of kids’ reach. Read all instructions and labels so you use these items properly.
- Cut your risk for sunburn and skin cancer by wearing wide-brimmed hats, sun shades, and sunscreen with sun protective factor (SPF) 15 or higher.
- Protect against diseases carried by mosquitoes and ticks. Use insect repellent. Wear long-sleeved shirts. Tuck pants into your socks.
- If you’re outside in hot weather, drink plenty of water.
- Pay attention to signs of heat-related illness, including high body temperature, headache, rapid pulse, dizziness, nausea, confusion, or unconsciousness. Seek emergency medical care if needed.

