

Garden Planting Guides

This guide offers planning models for school gardens and features plants that are appropriate for the Chicago growing season. Gardeners must plant according to the local agricultural hardiness zone. In Chicago, our freezing winters limit which plants can be grown successfully! When selecting plants to grow, keep in mind that Chicago is located in [Zone 5b/6a](#); plants that thrive in warmer zones will not do well in this region.



Seasonal Gardening

Some plants can be grown all season long, whereas other plants can be harvested and replanted in succession depending on the season. Crops are generally categorized as *cool season* or *warm season crops*:

- **Cool season crops** can tolerate a light frost; they thrive in cooler weather, and have varying tolerances for heat. Plant them as soon as the soil can be worked in spring, typically at the beginning of April. These crops can also be replanted for a fall harvest, usually starting in mid-late August.
- **Warm season crops** cannot tolerate frost; they thrive in the heat of summer. It is recommended to plant them after the last frost of spring, which is May 15th.

We recommend the 30-Day Salad Garden for a relatively quick harvest in spring and fall; this model works well when the garden is put to bed for the summer. All other garden planning models require dedicated summer maintenance.

Planting Tips

In this guide, planting techniques are recommended for each plant. Follow proper spacing guidelines according to square foot gardening techniques, meaning how many plants are recommended per square foot.

- **Direct Seeding (DS)** - These plants can be directly seeded into the garden. Typically you can sow 2-3 seeds per plant, and then thin them out once they've germinated.
- **Transplanting (T)** - These plants are best transplanted into the garden as seedlings, according to the time of year that is ideal for each plant to grow. These plants can be **started (ST)** early, but this requires the proper equipment and space for doing so.



Harvesting Tips

This guide also provides basic harvesting tips for each plant. Here are some general harvesting tips:

- Greens and herbs can be harvested with the “cut and come again” technique, which means snipping off individual leaves, sprigs, or stems on the outside/bottom of the plant, and allowing the inside of the plant to continue producing new leaves. Keep in mind that your harvested leaves will wilt in hot temperatures; keep your harvest containers in the shade and transport them to a cool or refrigerated area as soon as possible. Greens that have wilted can be revived in cool water.
- Some cool weather plants will grow very tall and go to seed (aka bolt) in the heat of summertime, so make sure to harvest the entire plant before this happens. Once plants bolt, their energy goes into seed production and the veggies lose their flavor. Some plants can be “deadheaded” by pinching off their flowers, which encourages leaf production.





30-Day Salad Garden

This garden plan provides a delicious salad in springtime, and again in fall!

Follow this chart to determine how to plant seeds or seedlings according to square foot gardening guidelines. Alternatively, a bed of baby greens can be grown by “broadcasting” or scattering seeds in the garden – this is a great way to produce a large amount of greens in a short time.

Variety	Direct Seed/ Transplant	Plants/sq ft	Harvest	Tips
Lettuce	DS or T in early April, mid-late August	4 plants spaced 6” apart	Cut and come again: Clip outer leaves, allowing inner ones to grow	Harvest the whole plant before it bolts in the summer heat. Re-plant in late summer for a fall harvest.
Arugula	DS or T in early April, mid-late August	6 plants spaced 4” apart	Cut and come again: Clip outer leaves, allowing inner ones to grow	Harvest the whole plant before it bolts in the summer heat. Re-plant in late summer for a fall harvest.
Spinach	DS in early April, mid-late August	4 plants spaced 6” apart	Cut and come again: Clip outer leaves, allowing inner ones to grow	Plant broad-leaf spinach in spring/fall, and New Zealand spinach in summer.
Mustard Greens	DS in early April, mid-late August	4 plants spaced 6” apart	Cut and come again: Clip outer leaves, allowing inner ones to grow	The flowers are also edible! Harvest the seed pods to save for planting next year.
Rainbow Chard	DS or T in early April, mid-late August	2 plants spaced 8” apart	Cut and come again: Clip outer stalks, allowing inner ones to grow	Harvest at the base of the colorful stem.
Radish	DS in early April, late August	16 seeds spaced 2-3” apart	Clean off the “shoulders,” then twist and pull	Space seeds apart so they have enough room to grow. The flowers are also edible!
Dill	DS or T in late April, mid-late August	4 plants spaced 6” apart	Snip young shoots before flowers bloom – leaves will regrow	Attracts black swallowtail butterflies and caterpillars! Save the seeds for planting next year.

Key:

DS= Direct seed (aka direct sow) into garden

T= Transplant seedlings into garden

ST= Start seeds early indoors



Summer Salad Garden

If the garden is being used as a tool for parent or community engagement, the Favorite Salad Garden is useful because it requires a dedicated team willing to volunteer over the summer to ensure its survival.

Variety	Direct Seed/Transplant	Plants/sq ft	Harvest	Tips
Peas	DS in early April	8 plants spaced 3" apart	Clip individual peas, allowing the vine to keep growing	Pea vines grow vertically– plant seeds near a trellis!
Kale	T in early April, mid August	2 plants spaced 8" apart	Clip outer/lower leaves, allowing inner ones to grow	Kale is cold-hardy and can continue growing into late fall.
Collards	T in early April, mid August	2 plants spaced 8" apart	Clip outer/lower leaves, allowing inner ones to grow	Collard leaves can grow very big! Harvest them at the desired size.
Cabbage	T in early April, mid August	1 plant	Harvest once the cabbage head is fully developed	Try green or purple varieties!
Carrots	DS in early April	16 seeds spaced 2-3" apart	Clean off the "shoulders," then pull carefully	Carrots are very cold-hardy and can continue growing into late fall
Celery	DS or T in mid- April	2 plants spaced 8" apart	Harvest individual stalks, or the whole plant at once	Celery loves water. Try regrowing celery by placing the base in water!
Parsley	DS or T in early April, late August	2 plants spaced 8" apart	Clip outer stalks, allowing inner ones to grow	Parsley is biennial and cold-hardy. Try the curly or flat varieties!

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Salsa Garden

Salsa is super easy to prepare – just chop up these raw ingredients, or add them to a blender! It can be used as a dip for chips and as a delicious topping for a variety of dishes.

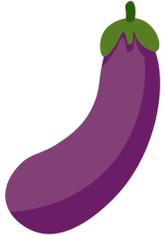
Variety	Direct Seed/ Transplant	Plants/sq ft	Harvest	Tips
Tomatoes	T in mid-May (ST in March)	1 plant	Harvest as soon as tomatoes turn deep red to avoid splitting	Support bush tomatoes with a cage; stake or “train” pole tomato vines.
Tomatillos	T in mid-May	1 plant	Harvest when the fruit fills the papery husk and it opens	Grow at least two plants for cross pollination.
Jalapeño Peppers	T in mid-May (ST in March)	1 plant	Clip large peppers off the plant, allow small ones to keep growing	Beware– extremely spicy!
Cilantro	DS or T in mid-April, mid-August	4 plants spaced 6” apart	Clip the outer stalks, allowing the inner ones to grow	Cilantro loves water– keep soil cool to avoid bolting. The seeds are coriander!
Corn	DS in mid-May	2 plants spaced 8” apart	Harvest as soon as the silk tassels turn brown and the cob is full	Critters love corn– be sure to harvest them before the squirrels do!
Bulb Onion	T in April (ST in February)	9 plants spaced 4” apart	Harvest when bulbs are big and the tops begin to turn yellow and fall over	Keep them watered! Shade the surrounding soil to help with water retention.
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Pizza Garden

Who doesn't love pizza? Use these veggies and herbs as pizza toppings or sauce ingredients. Be creative with your garden space — you can use string to separate the planting areas into slices!

Variety	Direct Seed/Transplant	Plants/sq ft	Harvest	Tips
San Marzano Tomatoes	T in mid-May (ST in March)	1 plant	Harvest as soon as tomatoes turn deep red to avoid splitting	Support bush tomatoes with a cage; stake or "train" pole tomato vines.
Bell Peppers	T in mid-May (ST in March)	1 plant	Clip large peppers off the plant, allow small ones to keep growing	Comes in many varieties and colors!
Eggplant	T in mid-May (ST in March)	1 plant	Clip large eggplants off the plant, allow small ones to keep growing	Try the Black Beauty Eggplant variety
Zucchini	DS or T in mid-May (ST in April)	1 plant per 2-4 square feet!	Clip zucchinis before they grow too large and lose flavor	Zucchini plants are huge! Monitor for mildew, clip leaves.
Basil	T in mid-May (ST in April)	4 plants spaced 6" apart	Snip off main stems above a leaf node. Stems will re-grow.	"Deadhead" or pinch off flowers to encourage leaf growth.
Oregano	T in mid-May (ST in March)	1 plant	Clip larger/outer sprigs, allow inner ones to keep growing	Can tolerate dry conditions
Scallions	DS or T in early April, early August	9 bunches spaced 4" apart	Harvest to thin out scallions as they grow	Aka green onions/bunching onions. Can also be re-grown in water!
Garlic	DS in October for springtime growth!	4 plants spaced 6" apart	Harvest garlic when the leaves start browning.	Plant bulbs in the fall for springtime growth!

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Veggie Medley Garden

Use these veggies for a variety of purposes — in stir fries, curries, stews, salads... the possibilities are endless!

Variety	Direct Seed /Transplant	Plants/sq ft	Harvest	Tips
Broccoli	T in April, August	1 plant	Harvest while broccoli is still firm, before it bolts in the heat	Grows best in cool weather. The flowers and leaves are edible too.
Cauliflower	T in April, August	1 plant	Harvest when heads are compact and firm.	Grows best in cool weather. The leaves are edible too.
Bok Choy	DS or T in early April, late Aug	4 plants spaced 6" apart	Harvest individual stalks with the cut and come again method	Harvest the whole plant before it bolts in the summertime heat.
Lunchbox Peppers	T in mid-May (ST in March)	1 plant	Clip large peppers off the plant, allow small ones to keep growing	These multi-colored mini bell peppers are easy and fun to grow!
Pumpkin	DS or T in late May (ST in April)	1 plant	Clip the pumpkin off the vine once it is turning orange	Pumpkin vines are enormous! Try mini pumpkins on a trellis.
Potato	DS in April	2 plants spaced 8" apart	Harvest when the leaves start to die back	Plant small seed potatoes whole, or cut them to separate the "eyes"
Sweet Potato	DS in mid-June	1 plant	Harvest once the leaves start to die back	Sweet potatoes need high temperatures to grow!
Okra	DS or T in mid-May	1 plant	Clip off the plant while okra is still small.	Okra flowers are beautiful, and edible!
Turnip	DS in early April, late Aug	9 plants spaced 4" apart	Harvest when purple tops are large. The greens are also edible	Turnips love water! Amend soil with compost to improve water retention.
Kohlrabi	DS or T in April, August	4 plants spaced 6" apart	Harvest when bulbs are large. The greens are also edible	Try green or purple varieties! Amend with nitrogen fertilizer
Beets	DS or T in mid-April, mid August	9 plants spaced 4" apart	Harvest when the beet roots are visible. The greens are also edible	Beets need lots of water and nitrogen— add compost + fertilize before planting.

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Sweet Sensory Garden

This sensory garden includes a blend of annual fruits, aromatic herbs and colorful flowers.

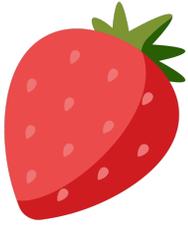
Variety	Start/Transplant	Plants/sq ft	Harvest	Tips
Watermelon	DS or T in mid-May (ST in April)	1 plant	Harvest when the tendrils are dry	Water alot! Grow small varieties like Sugar Baby on a trellis.
Cantaloupe	DS or T in mid-May (ST in April)	1 plant	Harvest when the fruit turns orange, and smells sweet!	Water the soil a lot, but avoid the leaves! Vines grow on a trellis.
Stevia	T in mid-May (ST in March)	1 plant	Pick individual leaves and allow the plant to keep growing	Kids love these sweet tasting leaves!
Chamomile	DS or T in mid-April, mid-August	1 plant	Pinch off flowers as they grow.	Prefers dry conditions
Zinnia	DS or T in mid-May	4 plants spaced 6" apart	Harvest mature blooms with strong stems	Clipping the main stem will encourage multiple stems and blooms!
Cosmos	DS or T in mid-May	4 plants spaced 6" apart	Cut and come again: Harvest as soon as flowers bloom	Pinch tip off main stem to encourage bushier growth
Marigold	DS or T in mid-May	1 plant	Collect seeds from mature seed pods!	Pinch tip off main stem to encourage bushier growth
Sunflower	DS or T in mid-May	1 plant	Harvest once the petals dry out	Collect seeds from mature plants!

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Perennial Garden

If your school is still trying to establish a robust garden team, the Perennial Garden requires little maintenance and keeps your edible garden looking great. These plants will grow back year after year without the need to seed! These varieties can be difficult to cultivate from seed — consider purchasing pre-started plants, or better yet, ask a fellow gardener to dig up a portion of their plants (don't feel bad, they'll grow back next year!) that you can transplant into your garden. Some herbs are perennial and are best brought inside for the winter, so plant them in a container! When harvesting herbs, make sure to leave at least a third of the plant to re-grow.

Variety	Transplant	Plants/sq ft	Harvest	Tips
Asparagus*	T in April	1 plant	Harvest is best the 3rd year, once spears are tall and strong.	Don't trim/harvest the first year, which allows the crowns to grow strong.
Rhubarb	T in April	1 plant	Harvest when the stalks are at least 10" long	Reduce harvesting in late summer/fall so that it has energy reserves for winter
Strawberries	T in April	4 plants spaced 6" apart	Harvest as soon as strawberries turn red	Strawberries will take over! Plant them in a large pot or separate area.
Chives	T in April	1 plant	Harvest while shoots are tender	The purple flowers are delicious!
Thyme	T in mid-May	1 plant	Harvest bundles of stems at a time-	It will spread, so give it space or its own container. Try lemon thyme!
Lavender	T in mid-May	1 plant	Harvest before blooms open. Clip stems close to main stem	Likes dry conditions. Plant in a pot and bring it inside for the winter!
Sage	T in mid-May (ST in March)	1 plant	Snip off large leaves from the top, allowing small leaves to grow	Prune stems above a leaf node to encourage bushier growth
Rosemary	T in mid-May	1 plant	Harvest before it flowers. Clip stems close to main stem	Likes dry conditions. Plant in a pot and bring it inside for the winter!
Raspberries	T in mid-May	1 plant	Harvest when the berries fall easily off the plant	Give brambles plenty of room to grow

Blackberries	T in mid-May	1 plant	Pick when the berries are fully ripe (more dull, less shiny)	They love water! Select a thornless variety.
Ground Cherries	T in late May	1 plant	Harvest when fruit begins to soften inside its thin paper shell.	Monitor as they spread or they'll take over!
Mint	T in mid-May	1 plant	Pinch off stems above a leaf node– they will branch out and regrow	Mint will take over! Plant it in a separate area or large container.
Lemon Balm	T in mid-May	1 plant	Pick leaves, or harvest stems and they will regrow	Lemon balm will take over! Plant it in a separate area or large container.
Walking Onion	T in fall before the frost!	1 plant	Harvest them at different stages for different flavors.	Monitor their spread – they will take over! Plant in separate area or container

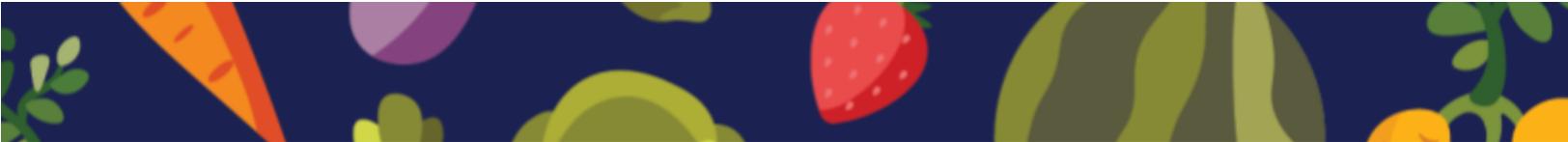
*CAUTION: Asparagus berries are toxic – do not ingest.

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References

- ¹ "Growing a Salsa Garden." [Chicago Botanic Gardens.](#)
- ² "Maintaining a Perennial Garden." [Chicago Botanic Gardens.](#)
- ³ "Ten Herbs to Start Growing." [Chicago Botanic Garden.](#)