The Budget Food Garden



Grow a Year's Worth of Food Without Breaking the Bank

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Introduction: Growing Food When Money Is Tight



I started my first serious food garden when I was broke. Not "tight budget" broke—actually broke, as in making $18,000 a year in a city where rent was $700 a month. I'd been reading about gardening and food security, and I knew I needed to reduce my grocery spending, but I had maybe $30 to put toward starting a garden. That was it.

Most gardening books and websites assume you have money to spend. They tell you to buy raised bed kits, purchase bags of compost, invest in quality tools, buy seed-starting equipment, and set up irrigation systems. I couldn't do any of that. I needed to figure out how to grow food with almost no money, using whatever I could find for free or close to it.



That first season, I spent $28 total. I bought $12 worth of seeds, $10 worth of used tools from a garage sale, and $6 worth of wood screws to build a trellis from scavenged lumber. Everything else—soil amendments, containers, stakes, mulch, pest control—was free. I grew about 200 pounds of vegetables that first summer, which replaced at least $300-400 worth of groceries. It wasn't elegant, and it wasn't pretty, but it worked.

Over the next few years, I refined my methods. I learned which free resources were most valuable, which low-cost investments paid off, and which expenses were completely unnecessary. I learned how to start plants without buying equipment, how to build soil without buying compost, and how to manage pests without buying products. I built a garden that produced consistently and abundantly without requiring ongoing financial investment.

This guide is about what I learned in that process. It's for people who need to grow food but don't have money to spend—people who are starting from scratch with limited resources and who need practical, no-cost methods that actually work. Everything in this guide is focused on minimizing or eliminating expenses while still producing a garden that feeds you reliably.



I need to be clear about what this guide is and isn't. This is not about saving money on groceries by growing high-value crops—that's a different topic. This is not about generating income from selling surplus—that's also different. This is specifically about starting and running a productive garden when you have little or no money to invest. The goal is food production at minimal cost, not maximum efficiency or maximum yield per square foot.



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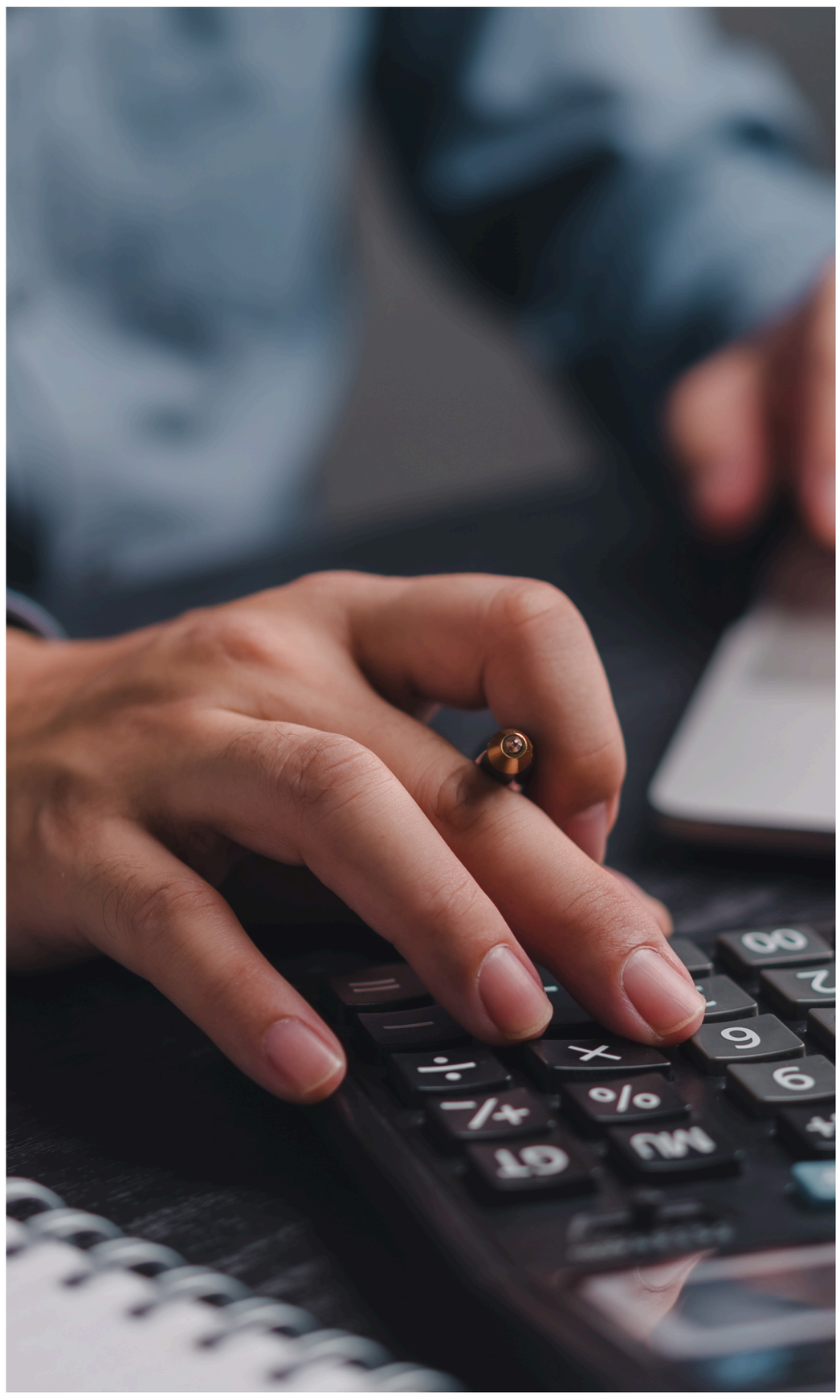
The methods here require more labor and more resourcefulness than conventional gardening. When you're working with no budget, you compensate with effort and creativity. You spend time sourcing free materials, building things from scratch, and using manual methods instead of buying solutions. That's the tradeoff. If you have money but limited time, these methods might not be for you. But if you have time and resourcefulness and you need to keep costs down, these methods work.



I also want to address the reality that starting a garden with no money is harder than starting with a budget. It takes longer to get established, it requires more problem-solving, and there are more potential points of failure. But it's absolutely doable, and the payoff—fresh food that you didn't have to pay for—is worth the effort.

Throughout this guide, I'll show you how to find free seeds, free soil amendments, free containers, and free materials for building infrastructure. I'll show you how to start plants without buying equipment, how to build fertility without buying fertilizer, and how to manage pests without buying pesticides. I'll also tell you the few things that are worth spending money on if you have even a small amount available.



If you follow these methods, you can establish a productive garden for under $50, and you can maintain it year after year for close to nothing. That's not hyperbole—it's what I did, and it's what I've watched other people do when they applied these principles consistently.

The biggest barrier to budget gardening isn't lack of money—it's the belief that you need money to do it right. You don't. You need knowledge, effort, and resourcefulness. This guide provides the knowledge. The effort and resourcefulness are up to you.

Chapter 1: Starting with Zero Budget

Free Seeds: Seed Libraries, Seed Swaps, and Saving Your Own

Seeds are the foundation of any garden, and they're also one of the easiest things to get for free if you know where to look.

Seed libraries are becoming increasingly common in public libraries and community centers. The concept is simple: gardeners donate seeds they've saved or extras they don't need, and anyone can take seeds for free. You're encouraged to save seeds from what you grow and return them to the library, but there's no requirement. I've gotten tomatoes, beans, lettuce, squash, and herbs from seed libraries without spending a cent.



To find a seed library, check your local public library's website or call and ask. Also check community centers, food co-ops, and gardening clubs. If your area doesn't have a seed library, consider starting one—it costs nothing except time to organize.

Seed swaps are informal events where gardeners bring seeds they've saved and trade with others. These happen at community gardens, through gardening clubs, and sometimes at farmers markets. I've attended seed swaps where I left with two dozen varieties of seeds without spending anything. Bring seeds if you have them, but most swaps welcome newcomers even if they have nothing to trade.



The first year, you might need to buy a few packets of seeds or get them from a seed library. After that, you can

save enough seeds from your harvest to replant the next year without buying more. This is how people gardened for thousands of years before seed companies existed, and it still works.



Asking gardening neighbors is often overlooked but surprisingly effective. Most experienced gardeners have more seeds than they need, and many are happy to share. If you see someone working in their garden, introduce yourself and ask if they have any extra seeds they'd be willing to share. I've gotten seeds this way many times—people are usually generous when they see someone trying to start a garden.

Free Plants: Divisions from Gardening Neighbors, Community Plant Swaps

You don't need to grow everything from seed. Many crops can be started from divisions or cuttings, and you can often get these for free from other gardeners.

Perennial vegetables and herbs are particularly easy to get as divisions. Rhubarb, asparagus, horseradish, chives, oregano, thyme, and mint all spread readily, and most gardeners have more than they need. Ask a gardening neighbor if they'd be willing to dig up a division for you in spring or fall. I've gotten rhubarb, chives, oregano, and horseradish this way without spending anything.



Community plant swaps work like seed swaps but focus on live plants. People bring extra seedlings, divisions, and cuttings to trade. I've gotten tomato seedlings, herb plants, and even small fruit bushes at plant swaps. Check with local gardening clubs, community gardens, or Master Gardener programs to find plant swaps in your area.





Cuttings are another way to get free plants. Many herbs—rosemary, basil, mint, sage—can be propagated from cuttings. If you know someone with an established herb plant, ask if you can take a cutting. Place the cutting in water until roots develop, then plant it. I've started numerous herb plants this way at no cost.

Free "volunteers" are plants that self-seed in gardens. If you're starting a garden in an area that previously had a garden, you might find volunteer tomatoes, herbs, or squash appearing in spring. Let them grow and see what they produce. Some of my best tomato plants have been volunteers that appeared on their own.



The key to getting free plants is to connect with the local gardening community. Join a gardening group, volunteer at a community garden, or just talk to people who have gardens. Once you're connected, opportunities for free plants appear regularly.

Free Containers: Food-Safe Buckets, Repurposed Materials

If you don't have ground space for a garden, containers work fine, and you don't need to buy expensive pots. Food-safe buckets and other repurposed materials work just as well.



Five-gallon buckets are ideal for growing tomatoes, peppers, and other large plants. You can often get them for free from bakeries, delis, or restaurants—they receive ingredients in these buckets and usually throw them away. Ask the manager if you can have some empty buckets. Make sure they're food-safe (not used for chemicals) and wash them thoroughly before using.





Drill 4-6 drainage holes in the bottom of each bucket, fill with soil, and plant. A single five-gallon bucket will support one tomato plant or two pepper plants.

Other repurposed containers that work well include large plastic storage totes (drill drainage holes), old coolers (same), and sturdy cardboard boxes lined with plastic. I've grown lettuce and greens in plastic storage totes that were cracked and no longer useful for storage. They lasted two seasons before falling apart, which was long enough.



Milk jugs and 2-liter bottles work for smaller plants like herbs or lettuce. Cut the top off, drill a few drainage holes in the bottom, and fill with soil. These containers are lightweight and easy to move, though they don't last more than a season.



Wooden pallets can be broken down and reassembled into container boxes. Many businesses give away pallets for free—check Craigslist, Facebook Marketplace, or local warehouses. Make sure the pallet is heat-treated (stamped "HT"), not chemically treated (stamped "MB"), so you're not introducing chemicals to your soil.

Burlap sacks or feed bags work for growing potatoes. Fill the bag with soil, plant seed potatoes, and let them grow. When it's time to harvest, dump the bag and collect the potatoes. These bags are sometimes available for free at feed stores if you ask, or you can buy them for $1-2 each.



The downside of free containers is that they're often not as attractive as purchased pots, and some of them don't last as long. But if your priority is growing food cheaply, appearance doesn't matter, and even a container that only lasts one or two seasons is still free.

Free Soil Amendments: Leaves, Grass Clippings, Coffee Grounds



Soil quality is critical for growing food, and improving soil is usually where gardeners spend the most money—buying compost, manure, fertilizer, and other amendments. But you can build excellent soil without spending anything if you're willing to source materials for free.

Leaves are the single best free soil amendment. They're abundant in fall, they're free for the taking, and they break down into rich, crumbly compost. I collect bags of leaves from neighbors who pile them at the curb for municipal pickup. I also rake leaves from public parks or street medians if they're available.



You can use leaves in several ways: pile them directly on garden beds as mulch, compost them, or chop them with a mower and mix them into soil. Shredded leaves break down faster than whole leaves. I use leaves as mulch in fall and winter, and by spring, they've decomposed enough to dig into the soil.

Grass clippings are another excellent free amendment, though you need to be careful with them. Fresh grass clippings are high in nitrogen and will heat up if piled too thickly, which can burn plants. Use them as a thin mulch around plants (no more than 1-2 inches), or add them to compost in thin layers mixed with leaves or other brown material.



Only use clippings from lawns that haven't been treated with herbicides or pesticides. Ask before collecting clippings from neighbors, and avoid clippings from commercial lawn services, which often use chemicals.

Coffee grounds are available for free from coffee shops. Many shops have programs where they bag up used grounds and leave them out for gardeners. Starbucks does this, as do many local cafes. Coffee grounds are high in nitrogen and work well mixed into compost or sprinkled lightly on soil.





Wood ash from woodstoves or fireplaces can be used sparingly to add potassium and raise soil pH. Don't use ash from treated wood, painted wood, or charcoal briquettes—only natural, untreated wood. Apply no more than a light dusting per bed, as too much ash raises pH excessively.





Newspaper and cardboard are useful for mulching and smothering weeds. Collect newspapers from neighbors or from recycling bins (with permission), and save cardboard boxes from your own deliveries or from businesses that are throwing them away. Both break down over time and add organic matter to soil.

Manure is available for free if you live near farms or stables. Chicken, cow, horse, and rabbit manure are all excellent amendments once composted. Call local farms and ask if they have manure available—many farms are happy to let you take it for free because it reduces their disposal costs. Manure must be composted before use (fresh manure burns plants), so plan to let it sit for 6-12 months before adding it to beds.

The key to free soil amendments is logistics. You need a way to collect and transport materials, and you need space to store them while they compost or break down.



I use a pickup truck borrowed from a friend, and I pile materials in an out-of-the-way corner of my yard. If you don't have a vehicle, focus on materials you can collect by hand or that neighbors will drop off for you.

Free Water: Rain Barrels from Free Materials

Water costs money in most places, and if you're running a garden on a tight budget, irrigation expenses can add up. Rain barrels let you collect free water from your roof and use it to water your garden.

You can buy rain barrel kits for $50-100, but you can also build them for free or close to it using repurposed materials.

Food-grade barrels are available for free or cheap from businesses that receive liquid ingredients in bulk. Check with beverage distributors, car washes, or food processing facilities.



Barrels that previously held soda syrup, juice concentrate, or other food products work well. Avoid barrels that held chemicals or non-food products.

To convert a barrel into a rain barrel, you need to add a spigot near the bottom and a way to collect water from your downspout. The spigot can be purchased for $5-10 at a hardware store, or you can sometimes find them at garage sales. Drill a hole near the bottom of the barrel, insert the spigot, and seal it with a rubber washer and plumber's putty.









For the downspout connection, cut your existing downspout above the height of the barrel, and attach a flexible downspout extension or simply position the barrel under the downspout opening. You'll need to cut a hole in the lid of the barrel for the water to enter, and you should add a screen over the hole to keep out mosquitoes and debris.

If you can't find a free barrel, large plastic trash cans (new or used) work as well. They're smaller—typically 30-40 gallons instead of 55—but they function the same way.



One rain barrel will collect about 40 gallons of water for every inch of rain that falls on a 1,000-square-foot roof. In most climates, that's enough to significantly reduce or eliminate the need for municipal water during the growing season.

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The main limitation of rain barrels is that they don't work well in climates with minimal rainfall or in situations where your roof doesn't drain to an accessible location. But if you have even moderate rainfall and a roof with gutters, rain barrels are one of the best free resources available.

Common Mistakes / Watch-Outs



The most common mistake people make when sourcing free materials is accepting things that aren't safe for food gardens. Not all plastic is food-safe, not all wood is untreated, and not all manure is free of contaminants. Always ask what a container previously held, check wood for chemical treatment stamps, and make sure manure comes from herbivore animals fed natural diets (no horse manure from stables that use deworming chemicals heavily).

Another mistake is taking on too much too fast. It's tempting to say yes to every free load of manure or every pile of leaves, but if you don't have space to store it or time to process it, you'll end up with a rotting mess. Start small and scale up as you figure out your systems.



A third mistake is not cleaning containers thoroughly. Food-safe buckets and barrels still need to be washed before use, especially if they held sugary substances that can attract pests or harbor mold.



Finally, watch out for the temptation to hoard materials "just in case." Free materials are abundant if you're resourceful, so you don't need to collect five years' worth of leaves or 50 buckets when you only need 10. Take what you need and leave the rest for others or for next time.

Chapter 2: Building Garden Infrastructure for Pennies

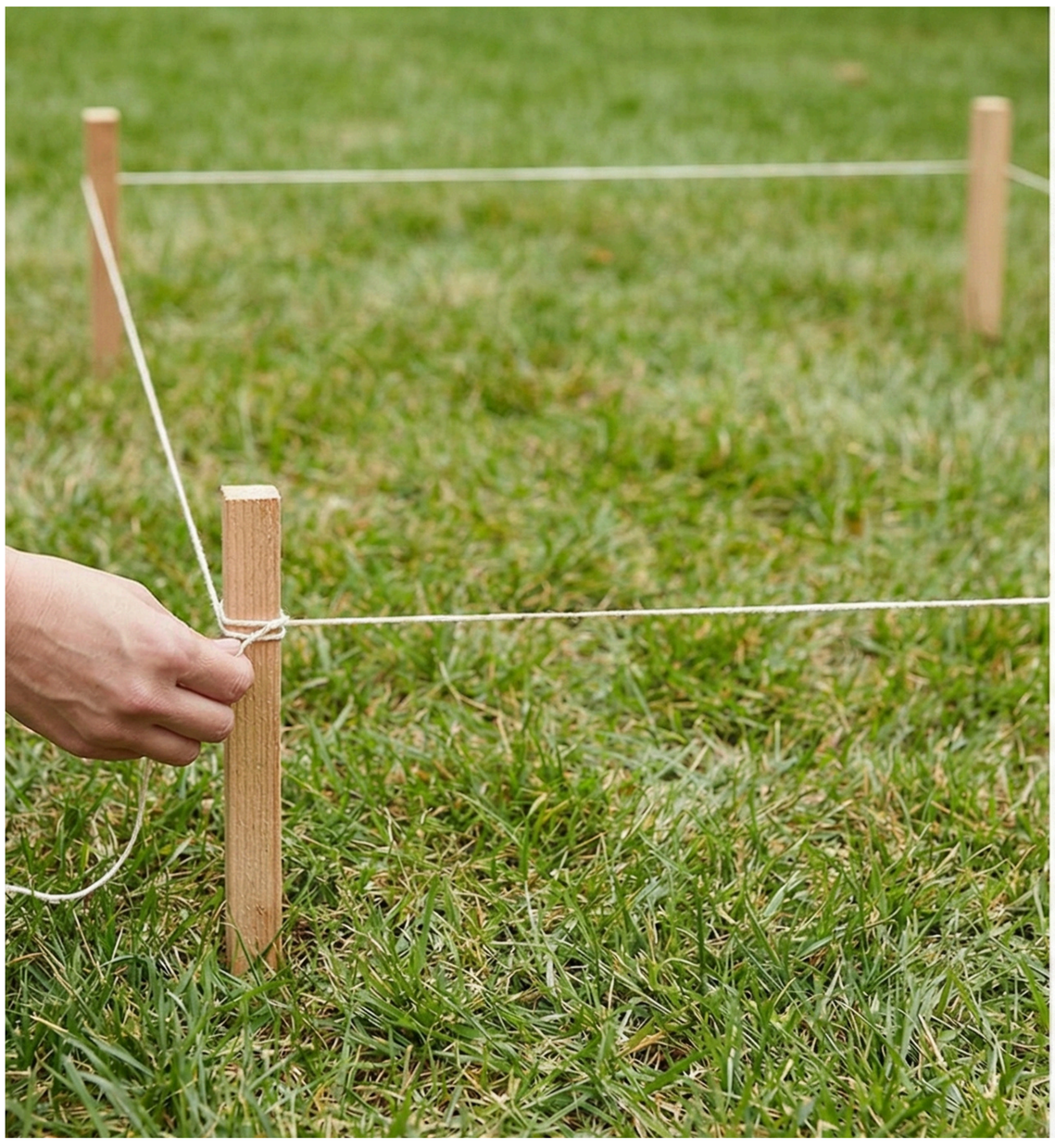
No-Dig Beds Using Free Cardboard and Organic Matter



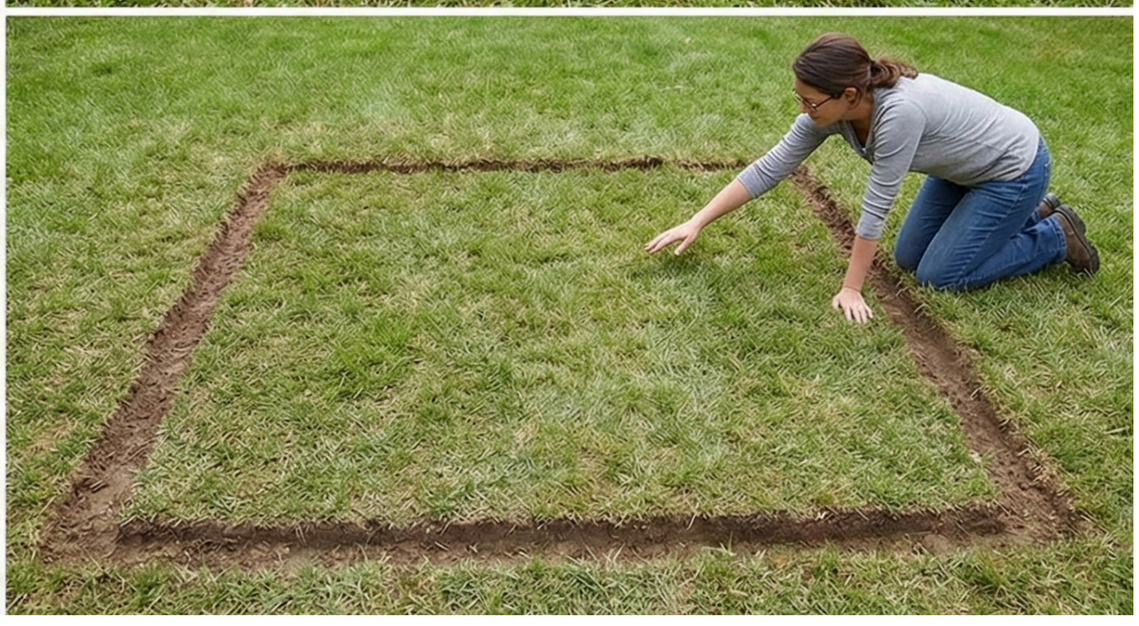
No-dig beds—also called lasagna beds or sheet mulching—are the cheapest and easiest way to create garden space from scratch. You don't need to rent a tiller, buy topsoil, or remove existing grass. You simply layer free organic materials on top of the ground and let them decompose into rich soil.

Here's the basic process:

1. **Mark out your bed** with stakes and string or just lay a hose on the ground to show the outline. Beds can be any size, but 3-4 feet wide is ideal because you can reach the center from either side without stepping on the soil.







2. **Lay down cardboard** to smother existing grass or weeds. Overlap pieces by 6 inches so there are no gaps. Use plain brown cardboard, not glossy or heavily printed material. If you don't have cardboard, newspaper 10-12 sheets thick works as well.





3. **Water the cardboard** thoroughly so it's soaked. This helps it conform to the ground and speeds decomposition.



4. **Layer organic matter** on top of the cardboard. Alternate "brown" materials (leaves, straw, wood chips) with "green" materials (grass clippings, kitchen scraps, manure). Each layer should be 2-4 inches thick. Aim for a total bed height of 12-18 inches by the time you're done.



5. **Top with finished compost or soil** if you have it. This gives you a planting surface immediately. If you don't have compost, top with several inches of straw or leaves and plant through them.



6. **Plant immediately** if you topped with compost, or wait 4-6 weeks if you didn't. The organic matter will settle and start to decompose, and the cardboard will prevent weeds from growing up through the bed.



I've built dozens of no-dig beds this way, and I've never spent more than a few dollars on materials (usually just for straw, which costs $5-8 per bale). Everything else—cardboard, leaves, grass clippings, kitchen scraps—was free.

No-dig beds improve over time as the organic matter breaks down and turns into soil. By the second season, the bed will be full of rich, fluffy soil that plants thrive in. You just keep adding organic matter on top each year—more leaves, more compost, more grass clippings—and the bed maintains itself.

The advantage of no-dig beds is that they require almost no upfront cost and almost no labor compared to traditional tilled beds. The disadvantage is that they take a few months to fully establish if you're not topping them with compost, so you need to plan ahead



Hugelkultur: Using Free Wood to Build Soil

Hugelkultur is a German technique that uses logs and woody debris as the foundation for garden beds. As the wood decomposes over several years, it releases nutrients, retains moisture, and creates air pockets in the soil. It's a way to turn waste wood into long-term soil fertility at no cost.

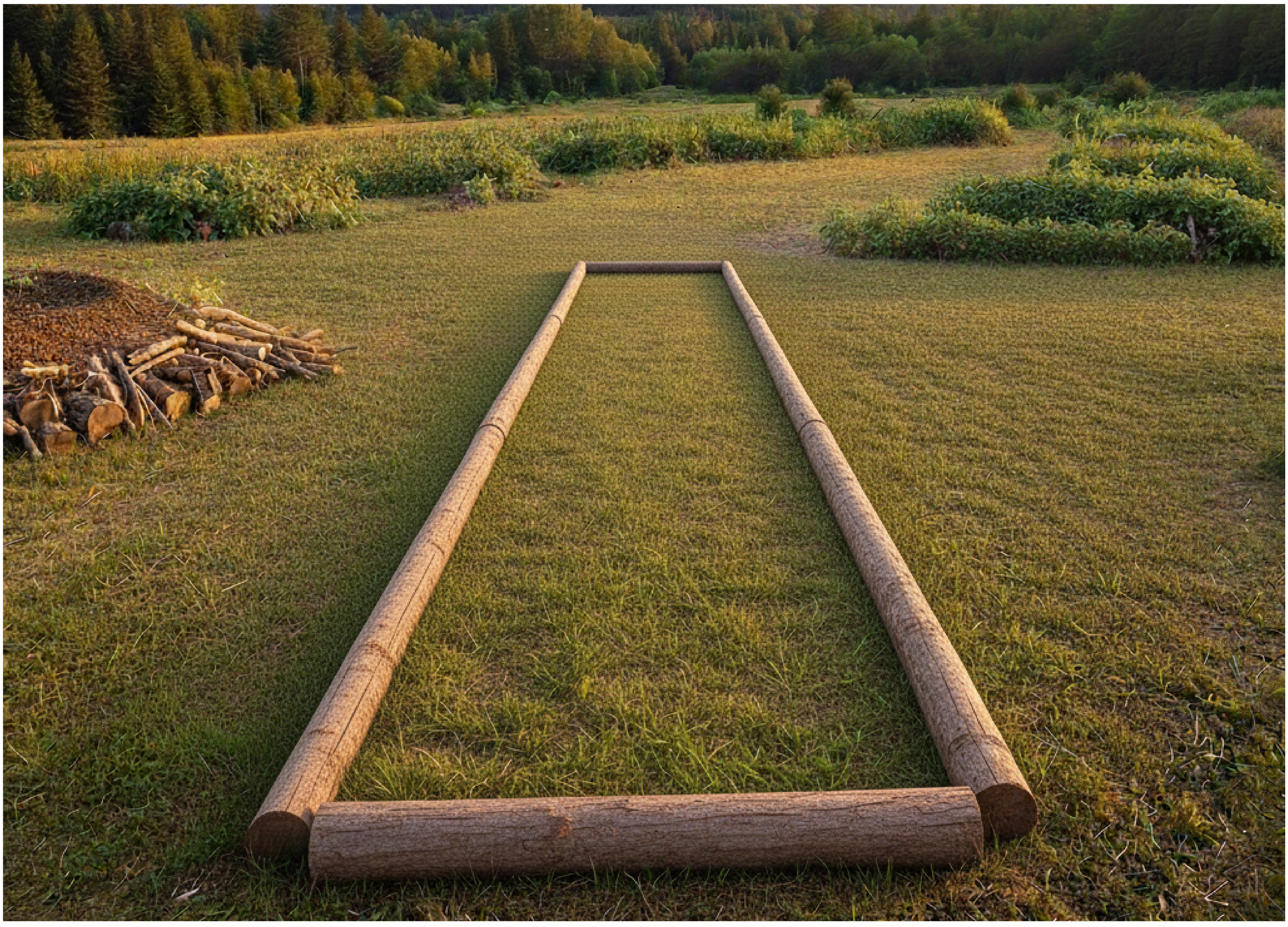


Here's how to build a hugelkultur bed:

1. **Collect logs and branches.** Any wood works—fallen branches, tree trimmings from neighbors, logs from cleared land. Larger wood is better because it takes longer to decompose, providing nutrients for more years. Avoid treated wood, painted wood, or wood from allelopathic trees (black walnut, eucalyptus) that inhibit plant growth.



2. **Lay the logs directly on the ground** in a row to mark the outline of your bed. You can dig a shallow trench if you want the bed to be ground-level, or you can leave the logs on top of the ground for a raised bed.



3. **Fill gaps between logs** with smaller branches, leaves, straw, or other organic matter.



4. **Cover everything with soil and compost.** You need at least 6-8 inches of soil on top of the wood so plants have a rooting medium. If you don't have enough soil, use a thick layer of compost, manure, or well-rotted leaves.



5. **Plant immediately** or wait a few weeks for the bed to settle. Water thoroughly after planting because new hugelkultur beds can be drier than regular beds until the wood becomes water-soaked.



Hugelkultur beds are essentially self-fertilizing. The decomposing wood feeds plants for 5-10 years or more, and it holds moisture like a sponge, reducing the need for irrigation. I've used this method to build beds in areas with poor soil where I didn't want to buy compost, and the beds have performed beautifully with no additional fertilizer.

The main limitation is that you need a source of free wood and a way to transport it. If you live in an area with trees, fallen branches are abundant, especially after storms. Check with tree trimming services—they often have wood chips and branches they need to dispose of and will deliver them for free if you have space.



Trellises from Branches and Salvaged Materials

Vertical growing is essential for maximizing space, and trellises don't need to cost anything. I've built functional trellises from branches, bamboo poles, salvaged lumber, and even old bed frames.



Branch trellises are the simplest option. Collect straight branches about 6-8 feet long and at least 1 inch in diameter. Sharpen one end with a hatchet or saw, and drive it into the ground at an angle to create an A-frame. Tie branches together at the top with twine or wire. Lean 3-4 smaller branches horizontally across the A-frame to create rungs that plants can climb.



This style works well for beans, peas, and cucumbers. It costs nothing except the time to gather branches, and it lasts 2-3 seasons before the wood starts to rot and needs replacement.

Bamboo pole trellises are similar but more durable. If bamboo grows in your area, cut poles in late fall or winter when sap levels are low. Bamboo is incredibly strong and lasts 5-10 years. You can build simple A-frame trellises, or you can lash poles together with twine to create more complex structures.



Salvaged lumber trellises are sturdier and last longer. I've built trellises from old fence boards, shipping pallets, and even lumber scraps from construction sites (always ask before taking). A simple trellis can be made from two 8-foot boards or stakes driven into the ground with horizontal slats nailed across them. Plants climb the slats or you can string twine between them.



String trellises are the cheapest option for tall plants like tomatoes or pole beans. Drive a tall stake into the ground at each end of your row, string twine or wire between the stakes, and hang vertical lengths of twine down for plants to climb. The materials cost a few dollars at most, and the trellis is easy to set up and take down.



Repurposed trellises can be made from almost anything vertical: old ladders, bed frames, wire shelving, cattle panels (sometimes available for free from farms), or even pieces of chain-link fence. I've used all of these at one time or another.



The key to free trellises is to think creatively and to accept that they don't need to be beautiful. A trellis made from lashed branches looks rustic, but it functions perfectly and costs nothing.

Tool Essentials: What You Actually Need vs. Nice to Have

When you're gardening on a zero budget, you need to distinguish between essential tools and nice-to-have tools. Essential tools are things you'll use constantly and that are difficult to substitute. Nice-to-have tools make work easier but aren't necessary.

Essential tools:

- **A digging tool:** A shovel or garden fork is essential for planting, digging, and turning compost. This is the one tool I'd recommend buying if you can spend even $10. A used shovel from a garage sale is fine.



- **A cutting tool:** A knife or hand pruners for harvesting, cutting twine, and general tasks. A sturdy kitchen knife works if you don't have pruners.









- **A watering method:** A watering can, hose, or buckets for transporting water. If you have municipal water, a hose is worth buying—even a cheap one costs $10-15 and lasts for years. If you're using rainwater, 5-gallon buckets work.

Nice to have but not essential:



Hoe (useful for weeding, but you can weed by hand)



Rake (useful for spreading mulch and smoothing beds, but you can do this by hand)



Wheelbarrow (makes moving materials easier, but you can use buckets or tarps to drag things)



Garden gloves (protect your hands, but you can work bare-handed if necessary)



Trowel (useful for transplanting, but a knife or your hands work fine)

I started my first garden with a used shovel ($3), a kitchen knife, and two 5-gallon buckets for carrying water and materials. That was it. Over time, I added a used hoe ($2), a rake ($5), and eventually a wheelbarrow (free from a neighbor who was getting rid of it). But I gardened productively for two years with just the basic tools.



If you have absolutely no money for tools, you can sometimes borrow tools from neighbors, from community gardens, or from tool-lending libraries (which exist in some cities). You can also trade work for tools—offer to help someone with a project in exchange for borrowing their tools or for a tool they no longer need.

Where to Find Free and Cheap Garden Supplies

Knowing where to look for free and cheap supplies is half the battle when you're gardening on a tight budget.

Craigslist and Facebook Marketplace have "free" sections where people give away things they no longer need. I've gotten buckets, lumber, fencing materials, pots, and even plants from these sites. Check the free sections daily and be ready to pick things up quickly—free items go fast.





Freecycle is a network of local groups where people give away items for free. Join your local Freecycle group and post requests for garden-related items. I've had people offer me manure, compost, pots, and tools through Freecycle.



Garage sales and estate sales are good sources for cheap tools and containers. Go late in the day when sellers are packing up—they're often willing to let things go for almost nothing rather than haul them away.

Craigslist "barter" section lets you trade work or other items for things you need. Offer to help someone with a project in exchange for garden supplies or materials.

Businesses are often willing to give away materials they'd otherwise throw away or pay to dispose of. Ask bakeries, restaurants, and grocery stores for food-safe buckets. Ask landscapers and tree trimmers for wood chips. Ask coffee shops for coffee grounds. Ask farms for manure. The worst they can say is no.

Municipal composting sites sometimes give away compost for free or very cheap. Check with your city or county to see if they have a composting program.

Neighbors are often willing to give away or share materials. Knock on doors, introduce yourself, and ask if they have leaves, grass clippings, or extra materials they'd be willing to share. Most people are helpful if you're polite and explain that you're starting a garden.



The key to sourcing free supplies is persistence and creativity. Not every lead will pan out, but if you're consistently looking and asking, you'll find what you need.

Common Mistakes / Watch-Outs

The most common mistake when building infrastructure on a budget is using materials that aren't suitable for long-term use. Rotted wood, rusted metal, and fragile plastic might be free, but they'll fail quickly and create more work. Be selective about what you accept, and prioritize materials that will last at least a few seasons.



Another mistake is building infrastructure that's too complex or too large for your needs. A simple 4-by-8 bed is easier to maintain and more productive per square foot than a sprawling 20-by-40 garden when you're just starting. Start small, prove the concept, and expand later.



A third mistake is not securing structures properly. Free-standing trellises can blow over in wind, and beds built on slopes can erode. Use stakes, anchors, or heavy objects to secure things, and think about drainage and stability when you're building.

Finally, watch out for the temptation to collect too much stuff. Free materials are abundant, but they take up space and require management. Focus on gathering what you need for this season, not what you might need in five years.

Chapter 3: Seeds and Starts on a Shoestring

The Seed-Saving Cycle: Buy Once, Grow Forever

Seed saving is the practice of collecting seeds from plants you've grown, storing them, and replanting them the next season. It's how gardeners maintained their crops for thousands of years before commercial seed companies existed, and it's the most reliable way to garden without spending money on seeds every year.





The basic cycle works like this: You grow a crop, let some plants go to seed, collect and dry the seeds, store them over winter, and plant them the next spring. After the initial investment (buying seeds or getting them from a seed library), you never need to buy those seeds again.

Not all crops are equally easy to save seeds from. Some—like tomatoes, beans, lettuce, and peppers—are simple because they're self-pollinating and the seeds are easy to collect. Others—like carrots, brassicas, and onions—are more complex because they're biennial (they don't flower until the second year) or because they cross-pollinate easily.

Here are the easiest crops for beginners to save seeds from:

Tomatoes: Let a few ripe tomatoes sit on the vine until they're overripe. Scoop out the seeds and the gel surrounding them into a jar, add a little water, and let it ferment for 2-3 days. This removes the gel coating and improves germination. Rinse the seeds, dry them on a paper towel, and store in an envelope.





Beans and peas: Let pods dry completely on the plant until they're brown and brittle. Shell the beans or peas from the pods and store in a cool, dry place.

Lettuce: Let a few plants bolt (go to seed) at the end of the season. The plant will send up a tall flower stalk, and the flowers will turn into fluffy seed heads. Collect the seed heads when they're dry, break them apart, and separate the seeds from the chaff.





Peppers: Let peppers ripen fully on the plant until they turn red, yellow, or orange (depending on variety). Cut open the pepper, scrape out the seeds, and dry them on a paper towel for a week. Store in an envelope.

Herbs (cilantro, dill, basil): Let plants flower and go to seed. Collect seed heads when they're dry and brown. Basil seeds are tiny and require careful collection, but cilantro and dill produce larger seeds that are easier to handle.



Once you've saved seeds, store them in paper envelopes or small jars in a cool, dry, dark place. Label each envelope with the crop, variety, and date. Most seeds stay viable for 2-5 years if stored properly.



In your first year, you might buy or acquire $10-15 worth of seeds. By the second year, you're replanting saved seeds and only buying new varieties you want to try. By the third year, you're entirely self-sufficient in seeds for the crops you've established. This is the foundation of zero-cost gardening.

Which Seeds Are Worth Buying vs. Saving

While seed saving is possible for most crops, some crops are much easier to save than others, and some are worth buying rather than saving if you have even a small budget.

Always save these (easy and reliable):

- **Tomatoes**
- **Beans** (bush and pole)
- **Peas**
- **Lettuce**
- **Peppers**
- **Herbs** (cilantro, dill, basil, parsley)
- **Squash** (if you're growing one variety and you have space to prevent cross-pollination)



Consider buying these (more difficult to save, or cheap to buy):

- Hybrid varieties (marked "F1" on the packet)—these don't come true from saved seed
- Brassicas (broccoli, cabbage, kale)—they're biennial and require overwintering, and they cross-pollinate easily
- Carrots—they're biennial and cross-pollinate
- Onions—they're biennial
- Corn—requires careful selection and isolation to prevent cross-pollination



Hybrid seeds are bred by crossing two specific parent plants to get desirable traits. If you save seeds from a hybrid, the next generation will not have the same traits—it will revert to one of the parent plants, which may be inferior. Open-pollinated (OP) and heirloom seeds, on the other hand, come true from saved seed, meaning the next generation will be the same as the parent.

When you're buying seeds, prioritize open-pollinated or heirloom varieties so you can save them. Check the seed packet or catalog description—it will usually indicate whether a variety is hybrid, open-pollinated, or heirloom.



If your budget is tight, buy seeds for crops you can't easily save (hybrids, biennials), and save seeds from everything else. If your budget is zero, stick with open-pollinated varieties and learn to save all your seeds, even from biennial crops.

Starting Seeds Without Expensive Equipment

Most seed-starting guides assume you'll buy seed trays, heat mats, grow lights, and potting mix. You don't need any of that. I've started thousands of plants without spending more than a few dollars on materials.

Containers: Any small container with drainage works. I use yogurt cups, egg cartons, toilet paper tubes, newspaper pots (rolled and folded from newspaper), or small plastic cups. Poke a hole in the bottom for drainage.











Soil: Seed-starting mix is ideal, but regular garden soil mixed with compost works if you screen it to remove large particles and debris. If you want to buy something, a small bag of seed-starting mix costs $5-8 and will start hundreds of plants.





Light: Seeds don't need light to germinate, but seedlings do. A sunny south-facing window works for most crops. If your windows don't get enough light, seedlings will get leggy (tall and weak).

In that case, consider winter sowing (covered below) or starting seeds outdoors once the weather is warm enough.

Heat: Most seeds germinate at room temperature (65-75°F). You don't need a heat mat. If your house is cold, place seed containers on top of the refrigerator or near a heat source.





Watering: Use a spray bottle or gently pour water from a cup. Seedlings are fragile and can be washed away by heavy watering.

Process: Fill containers with soil, plant seeds at the depth recommended on the seed packet (usually 2-3 times the diameter of the seed), water gently, and place in a warm spot. Keep soil moist but not soaking. Most seeds germinate in 5-14 days.



Once seedlings have two sets of true leaves (the second set of leaves that appear after the initial seed leaves), they're ready to transplant into larger containers or directly into the garden.

I start tomatoes, peppers, and brassicas indoors in early spring using this method. Everything else—beans, squash, lettuce, carrots—I direct-sow in the garden because they don't transplant well or they germinate easily in cool soil.

Winter Sowing: The Free Cold-Frame Method

Winter sowing is a technique where you start seeds outdoors in winter using recycled containers as mini-greenhouses. It's free, it requires no indoor space, and it produces strong, hardy seedlings.

Here's how it works:

1. **Collect containers:** Milk jugs, juice bottles, or any clear plastic container with a lid works. You'll cut the container in half horizontally, leaving a "hinge" so the top can open and close.





2. **Prepare containers:** Cut around the container about 3-4 inches from the bottom, leaving a 1-inch section uncut to act as a hinge. Poke 4-6 drainage holes in the bottom.





3. **Add soil:** Fill the bottom half of the container with 3-4 inches of potting mix or garden soil.

4. **Plant seeds:** Sow seeds at the recommended depth. You can plant 4-6 seeds per container depending on size.





5. **Close and label:** Close the top half of the container and tape it shut with duct tape. Use a permanent marker to label the container with the crop and date.

6. **Place outdoors:** Set containers outside in a spot that gets sun. They'll sit there all winter. Snow, rain, and cold won't hurt them—the containers protect the seeds.



7. **Wait:** Seeds will germinate when conditions are right, typically in late winter or early spring. You don't need to water or tend them—nature does the work.

8. **Vent and transplant:** Once seedlings emerge and temperatures warm up, open the container lids during the day to vent excess heat. When seedlings are large enough, transplant them into the garden.



Winter sowing works for cold-hardy crops like lettuce, kale, spinach, and herbs. It also works for flowers and some perennials. It doesn't work for heat-loving crops like tomatoes or peppers.

The advantage of winter sowing is that it's completely free (using recycled containers), it requires no indoor space, and the seedlings are already hardened off (adapted to outdoor conditions) when you transplant them. I use this method for starting lettuce, kale, and herbs, and I've never had better germination rates or stronger seedlings.

Propagating from Grocery Store Produce

Some vegetables can be regrown from grocery store scraps, giving you free plants without buying seeds.



Lettuce, celery, bok choy, and scallions will regrow from the base. Cut off the top portion to eat, leaving 1-2 inches of the base. Place the base in a shallow dish with water, and set it in a sunny window. Roots will develop in a few days, and new growth will appear within a week or two. Once roots are established, transplant into soil.



Potatoes can be planted from grocery store potatoes that have sprouted. Cut the potato into pieces with at least one "eye" (sprout) per piece, let the cut surfaces dry for a day, and plant them 4 inches deep in soil. This works with sweet potatoes as well—place a sweet potato in water until it sprouts, then plant the sprouts.



Ginger can be planted from grocery store ginger root. Look for pieces with small buds or "eyes." Plant the ginger 2 inches deep in a pot with the buds facing up. Keep soil moist and warm, and shoots will emerge in 2-4 weeks.

Garlic from the grocery store can be planted by separating the cloves and planting them individually in fall. Not all grocery store garlic will grow (some is treated to prevent sprouting), but it's worth trying if you have some that's starting to sprout.





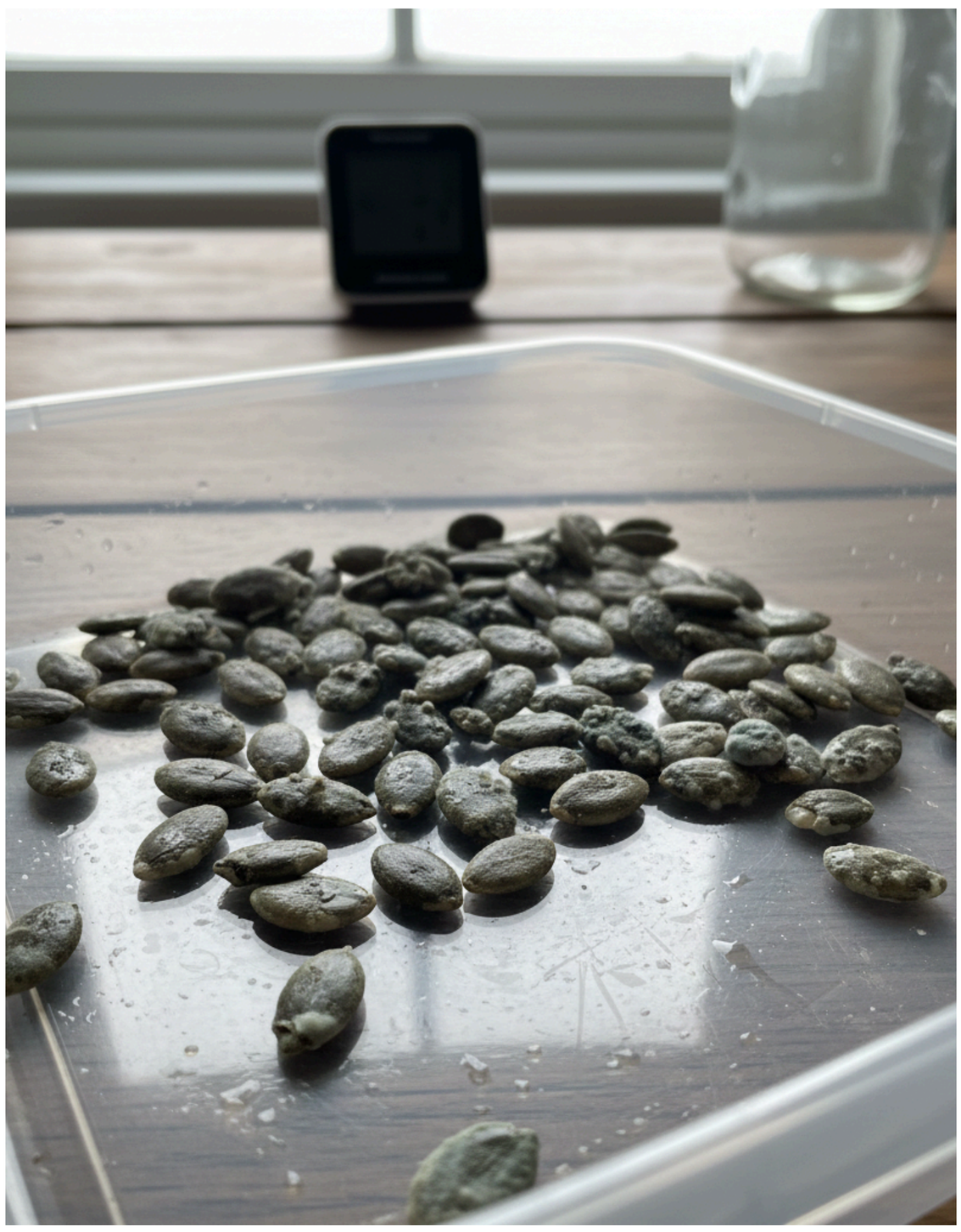
Herbs like basil, mint, and cilantro can sometimes be propagated from grocery store bunches. Place stems in water and wait for roots to develop, then plant in soil.

The success rate with grocery store propagation varies because some produce has been treated to prevent sprouting, and some has been stored too long to be viable. But it costs nothing to try, and when it works, you get free plants.

Common Mistakes / Watch-Outs

The most common mistake with seed saving is cross-pollination. If you grow multiple varieties of squash or cucumbers near each other, they'll cross-pollinate, and the seeds you save will produce hybrid offspring that may not resemble the parent plants. To avoid this, either grow only one variety of each cross-pollinating crop, or separate varieties by distance (at least 100 feet for squash, more for some crops).

Another mistake is not drying seeds fully before storage. Seeds that are stored damp will mold and rot. Spread seeds on a paper towel or screen and let them dry for at least a week in a warm, dry location before storing.



A third mistake is saving seeds from weak or diseased plants. Always save seeds from your best plants—the healthiest, most productive, most disease-resistant. This improves your crop over time through selection.



Finally, watch out for the temptation to save seeds from every single plant. You only need to save seeds from a few plants to have enough for next year. Be selective and focus on quality over quantity.

Chapter 4: Free Fertility

Composting 101: Turning Waste into Garden Gold

Compost is decomposed organic matter, and it's the foundation of soil fertility in organic gardening. You can buy compost for $30-50 per cubic yard, or you can make it for free using materials you'd otherwise throw away.



Composting is simple: you pile organic materials, keep them moist, and let them decompose. Microorganisms break down the materials into dark, crumbly compost that improves soil structure, provides nutrients, and supports beneficial soil life.

What to compost:



Kitchen scraps (fruit and vegetable peels, coffee



Grass clippings (in thin layers)



Leaves (shredded is best)



Garden waste (pulled weeds, plant trimmings)



Straw or hay



Manure (composted, not fresh)

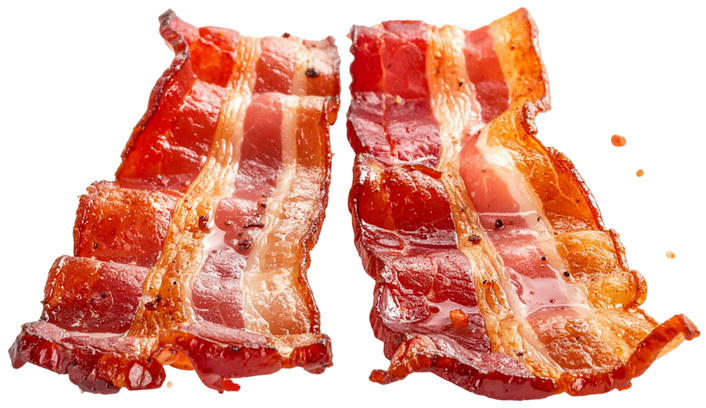


Cardboard and newspaper (shredded)

What NOT to compost:







Meat, dairy, or oily foods (attract pests)



Diseased plants (can spread disease)



Weeds with seed heads (seeds may survive composting)



Pet waste (can contain pathogens)

The process:

1. Start a pile in an out-of-the-way spot, or use a simple enclosure made from pallets, wire fencing, or stacked bricks. The pile should be at least 3 feet in diameter to generate enough heat for decomposition.



2. Layer "brown" materials (leaves, straw, cardboard) with "green" materials (kitchen scraps, grass clippings, fresh plant material). Aim for roughly 2 parts brown to 1 part green by volume.

3. Keep the pile as moist as a wrung-out sponge. Too dry and decomposition slows; too wet and the pile becomes anaerobic and smelly.



4. Turn the pile every few weeks with a pitchfork or shovel. This aerates the pile and speeds decomposition. If you don't want to turn it, just let it sit—it will take longer, but it will still decompose.





5. Finished compost is dark, crumbly, and smells earthy. It takes 2-6 months depending on temperature, moisture, and how often you turn the pile.

I've maintained a compost system for over a decade using only free materials—kitchen scraps, leaves from neighbors, grass clippings, and garden waste. I produce 3-4 cubic yards of compost per year, which is enough to fertilize my entire garden. The only cost is time.



If you don't have space for a large pile, you can compost in a smaller bin or even in a pile hidden behind a shed. The process is the same regardless of scale.

Sourcing Free Manure, Wood Chips, and Leaves

Three of the most valuable free amendments for building soil are manure, wood chips, and leaves. All three are abundant if you know where to look.

Manure is available from farms, stables, and small livestock owners. Chicken, cow, horse, sheep, and rabbit manure all work well. Call or visit local farms and ask if they have manure available. Many farms are happy to let you take it for free or for a small fee because it reduces their disposal costs.



Fresh manure must be composted before use—it's too high in nitrogen and can burn plants. Pile manure with carbon-rich materials (leaves, straw) and let it sit for 6-12 months before applying to the garden. Composted manure is dark, crumbly, and no longer smells strongly.

Wood chips are available from tree trimming services and municipal composting programs. Tree services often need to dispose of wood chips, and they'll sometimes deliver a load for free if you're on their route. Check websites like getchipdrop.com or call local tree services directly.





Wood chips work well as mulch, and they slowly break down into soil over time. Don't mix fresh wood chips into soil—they tie up nitrogen as they decompose. Instead, spread them on top of beds as mulch, or pile them and let them age for a year before using.

Leaves are abundant in fall in most areas. I've covered this already, but it's worth repeating: leaves are the single best free soil amendment. Collect bags of leaves from neighbors, rake leaves from public areas (with permission), or gather them from your own yard. Shred them with a mower to speed decomposition.





Cover Cropping: Growing Your Own Fertilizer

Cover crops are plants you grow specifically to improve soil, not to harvest for food. They're planted in off-season periods or in areas you're not currently using for food crops, and they're tilled or cut down and left on the soil to decompose.

Cover crops provide several benefits:

- They add organic matter and nutrients to soil
- They prevent erosion
- They suppress weeds
- They improve soil structure
- Some (legumes) fix nitrogen from the air and make it available to plants



Common cover crops include:



Clover (fixes nitrogen, easy to grow, tolerates poor soil)



Vetch (fixes nitrogen, grows well in cool weather)



Winter rye (prevents erosion, suppresses weeds, adds organic matter)



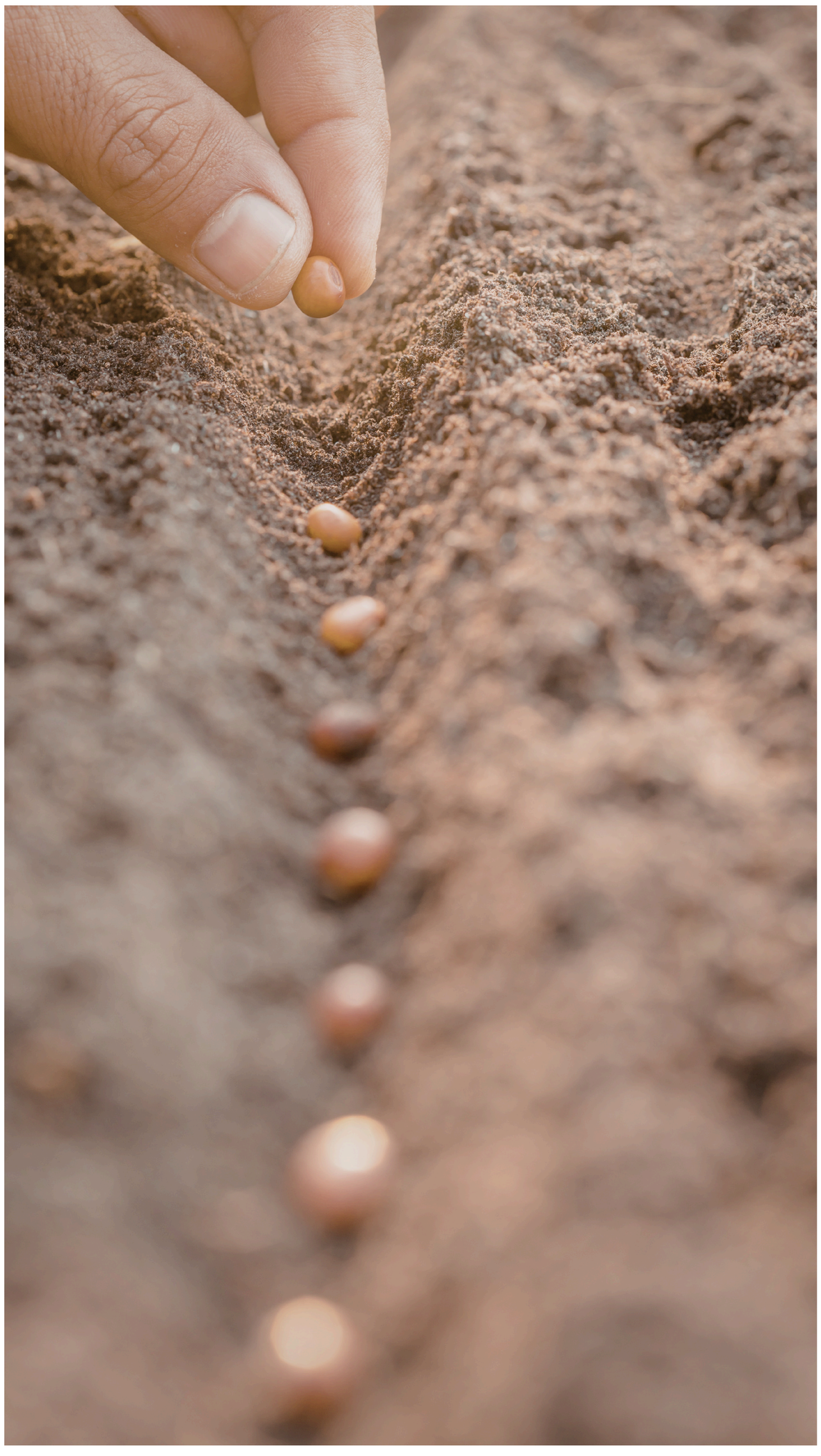
Buckwheat (fast-growing, suppresses weeds, adds organic matter)



Field peas (fixes nitrogen, good for spring planting)

Cover crop seeds can be expensive if you're buying from garden catalogs, but you can often find them cheaply at farm supply stores, or you can use grocery store dried peas or beans as cover crops. I've planted dried split peas from the grocery store as a cover crop with good results.

Plant cover crops in fall after your main crops are harvested, or plant them in spring in areas you're not using for food crops. Let them grow for 6-8 weeks, then cut them down before they go to seed and leave the plant material on the soil to decompose. You can till it in if you're tilling, or just leave it as mulch if you're using no-till methods.



Cover cropping is essentially composting in place. Instead of making a compost pile and then spreading finished compost on beds, you're growing organic matter directly where you need it. It's free, and it's one of the most effective ways to build soil fertility over time.



Compost Tea and Other Free Liquid Fertilizers

Liquid fertilizers provide a quick nutrient boost to plants, and you can make them for free from materials you already have.



Compost tea is made by steeping compost in water. Fill a bucket with water, add a shovelful of finished compost, and let it sit for 2-3 days, stirring occasionally. Strain out the solids and use the liquid to water plants. The tea provides nutrients and beneficial microorganisms.





Manure tea is made the same way using aged manure instead of compost. It's higher in nitrogen and works well for leafy greens and other nitrogen-hungry crops.

Grass clipping tea can be made by filling a bucket with fresh grass clippings, covering with water, and letting it steep for a few days. The liquid will be dark green and high in nitrogen. Dilute it by half with water before applying to plants.





Nettle tea or comfrey tea can be made if you have access to these plants. Both are high in nutrients. Fill a bucket with nettle or comfrey leaves, cover with water, and let it steep for 2-3 weeks. Dilute before using because the tea will be very concentrated (and it smells terrible).

Liquid fertilizers are most useful for container plants or for giving a quick boost to plants that are showing nutrient deficiency. They're not necessary for maintaining soil fertility—compost and mulch do that—but they're a useful tool to have available.

The "Chop and Drop" No-Cost Mulching Method



Chop and drop is a mulching technique where you cut plant material and leave it on the soil surface to decompose in place. It's the laziest, cheapest, and most effective mulching method I know.

The process is simple: when you're trimming plants, cutting back perennials, or pulling weeds (before they set seed), drop the plant material directly on the soil around your crops. It will decompose over time, adding organic matter, suppressing weeds, and retaining moisture.



I use chop and drop constantly. When I trim basil or other herbs, the trimmings go on the soil. When I pull weeds, they go on the soil (unless they have seeds). When I cut back perennial herbs or remove spent crops, the material stays in the bed.

This method mimics what happens in nature—plants drop leaves and stems, and they decompose where they fall. It requires zero effort beyond what you're already doing, and it's more effective than raking everything up and composting it separately because you're not losing nutrients to the composting process.



The only limitation is that you need to avoid dropping diseased plants or weeds with seeds, and you need to keep material a few inches away from plant stems to prevent rot.

Common Mistakes / Watch-Outs

The most common mistake with composting is not maintaining the right balance of materials. Too much green (nitrogen-rich) material makes the pile slimy and smelly. Too much brown (carbon-rich) material slows decomposition. Aim for roughly 2 parts brown to 1 part green by volume, and adjust if the pile isn't decomposing well.

Another mistake is not keeping the pile moist. Dry compost piles decompose very slowly or not at all. Water the pile when you add new material, and check moisture levels periodically.



A third mistake is composting materials that shouldn't be composted—meat, dairy, oily foods, or diseased plants. These either attract pests, create odors, or spread disease.

With cover crops, the mistake people make is letting them go to seed. Cover crops should be cut down before they flower and set seed, or else you'll have volunteers everywhere the next season.



Finally, watch out for applying fresh manure or uncomposted materials directly to beds where you're growing food. Fresh manure can burn plants, and uncomposted materials can tie up nitrogen as they decompose, temporarily starving plants. Always compost manure and woody materials before using them.

Chapter 5: Low-Cost Pest and Problem Management



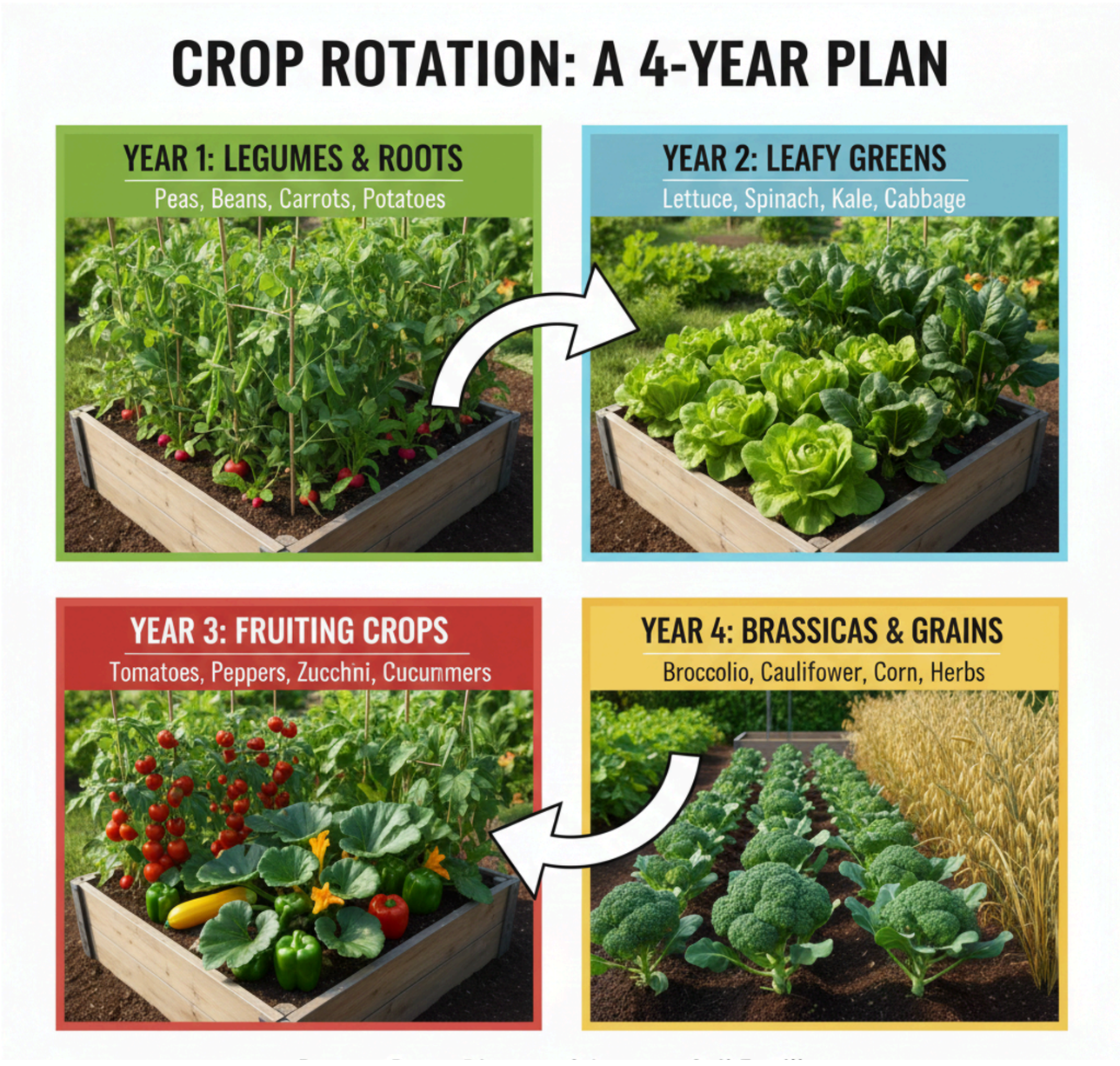
Prevention Over Treatment: The Cheapest Pest Control

The cheapest way to deal with pests is to prevent them from becoming a problem in the first place. Prevention requires no money, just attention and good practices.



Healthy soil produces healthy plants, and healthy plants resist pests better than stressed plants. If your soil is rich in organic matter and nutrients (which you're building with compost and cover crops), your plants will be vigorous and less susceptible to damage.

Crop rotation prevents pest buildup. Many pests overwinter in soil and target the same crop family year after year. If you plant tomatoes in the same spot every year, tomato pests will be waiting for them. If you rotate crops—planting tomatoes in a different bed each year—pests have a harder time finding their target. Rotate by crop family: tomatoes, peppers, and eggplants are one family; beans and peas are another; brassicas (kale, cabbage, broccoli) are another; cucumbers and squash are another.



Remove diseased or infested plants immediately. If you see a plant with severe pest damage or disease, pull it and dispose of it (not in compost). This prevents pests or disease from spreading to nearby plants.

Clean up plant debris in fall. Many pests and diseases overwinter in dead plant material. Clearing beds in fall and composting or disposing of debris reduces pest populations for the next season.





Use row covers to physically exclude pests. Lightweight fabric row covers keep insects off plants without blocking light. Drape covers over plants and secure edges with stones or soil. This works particularly well for preventing cabbage worms, flea beetles, and squash bugs.

Hand-pick pests regularly. Walk through your garden every few days and remove visible pests by hand. Drop them in a bucket of soapy water to kill them. This is tedious but effective, and it costs nothing.



Prevention is not glamorous, but it's the foundation of low-cost pest management. If you're proactive about building soil, rotating crops, and removing problems early, you'll have far fewer pest issues to deal with.

DIY Organic Sprays from Kitchen Ingredients

When prevention isn't enough, homemade sprays can address pest problems without spending money on commercial products.

Soap spray (for soft-bodied insects like aphids, whiteflies, and spider mites):

- Mix 1-2 tablespoons of liquid dish soap (not detergent) with 1 quart of water
- Spray directly on pests, coating them thoroughly
- The soap disrupts the insect's cell membranes, killing them on contact
- Reapply every few days until pests are gone
- Avoid spraying in direct sun or when temperatures are above 85°F, as this can damage plants



Garlic spray (for aphids, caterpillars, and general pests):

- Blend 4-6 cloves of garlic with 1 quart of water
- Let it steep overnight, then strain
- Add 1 tablespoon of liquid soap to help it stick to plants
- Spray on plants, focusing on undersides of leaves where pests hide
- The strong smell repels many pests



Pepper spray (for mammals, caterpillars, and some insects):

- Blend 2-3 hot peppers (jalapeños, habaneros, or dried cayenne) with 1 quart of water
- Let it steep overnight, then strain
- Add 1 tablespoon of liquid soap
- Spray on plants
- The capsaicin irritates pests and deters feeding
- Wear gloves when handling hot peppers and avoid getting spray in your eyes



Baking soda spray (for fungal diseases like powdery mildew):

- Mix 1 tablespoon of baking soda with 1 quart of water
- Add 1 tablespoon of liquid soap
- Spray on affected plants every 7-10 days
- The baking soda changes the pH on the leaf surface, making it inhospitable to fungi



These sprays are not as powerful as commercial pesticides, and they usually require multiple applications. But they're free or nearly free, they're safe, and they work well for minor to moderate pest problems.

Companion Planting for Natural Pest Management

Companion planting is the practice of growing certain plants together because they benefit each other—either by repelling pests, attracting beneficial insects, or improving growth.

Basil and tomatoes: Basil repels aphids, whiteflies, and tomato hornworms. Plant basil between tomato plants or around the edges of tomato beds.







Marigolds and most vegetables: Marigolds repel aphids, whiteflies, and some beetles. Plant them throughout the garden or around the edges of beds.

Nasturtiums and brassicas: Nasturtiums attract aphids, drawing them away from nearby crops (this is called trap cropping). Plant nasturtiums near kale, cabbage, or broccoli.





Onions or garlic and most crops: The strong smell repels many pests. Interplant onions or garlic with carrots, lettuce, or brassicas.



Dill and cucumbers: Dill attracts beneficial insects that prey on cucumber pests.



Borage and squash:

Borage repels tomato hornworms and attracts pollinators.



Companion planting is not a magic solution—it won't eliminate all pest problems—but it does provide some benefit, and it costs nothing if you're already growing herbs and flowers from saved seeds.

Beneficial Insects: Encouraging Free Pest Control

Beneficial insects are insects that prey on garden pests. Ladybugs eat aphids, lacewings eat aphids and thrips, parasitic wasps lay eggs in caterpillars and grubs, ground beetles eat slugs and caterpillars. If you encourage beneficial insects to live in your garden, they'll provide free, ongoing pest control.

Here's how to attract and support beneficial insects:

Plant flowers. Many beneficial insects need nectar and pollen in addition to their prey. Plant flowers like alyssum, yarrow, dill, fennel, coriander, and marigolds throughout the garden. These flowers attract parasitic wasps, hoverflies, and other beneficials.













Provide habitat. Beneficial insects need places to shelter and overwinter. Leave some areas of the garden slightly wild—piles of sticks, patches of unmowed grass, or perennial plantings that aren't disturbed. Ground beetles and spiders live in mulch and plant debris, so don't remove everything in fall.







Avoid broad-spectrum pesticides. Even organic pesticides like neem or pyrethrin kill beneficial insects along with pests. If you must spray, spot-treat problem areas rather than spraying the entire garden, and spray in the evening when beneficials are less active.

Accept some pest damage. Beneficial insects won't stick around if there's no food for them. A few aphids or caterpillars aren't a disaster—they're food for the beneficials. If you kill every pest immediately, you'll also eliminate the predators.



I don't buy beneficial insects. I plant flowers, leave habitat, and let nature balance itself. It takes a season or two for beneficial populations to build up, but once they're established, I rarely have serious pest problems.

Hand-Picking and Simple Physical Barriers

Sometimes the simplest solutions are the best. For many pests, hand-picking is the most effective control method, and it costs nothing but time.

Tomato hornworms are large, easy to spot, and easy to hand-pick. Check tomato plants every few days and remove any hornworms you find. They're disgusting, but they're slow and they can't hurt yo





Squash bugs and squash vine borers can be hand-picked as adults, and you can crush their egg masses (orange or bronze clusters on the undersides of squash leaves).

Cabbage worms are small green caterpillars that blend in with the leaves, but if you check plants regularly, you can find and remove them before they do significant damage.







Slugs and snails come out at night. Go out with a flashlight an hour after dark, collect them in a bucket, and dispose of them. Or set out shallow dishes of beer—slugs are attracted to it, they crawl in, and they drown.

Colorado potato beetles are easy to spot—striped yellow and black beetles and their red larvae. Hand-pick them daily when they first appear, and you can keep populations under control.



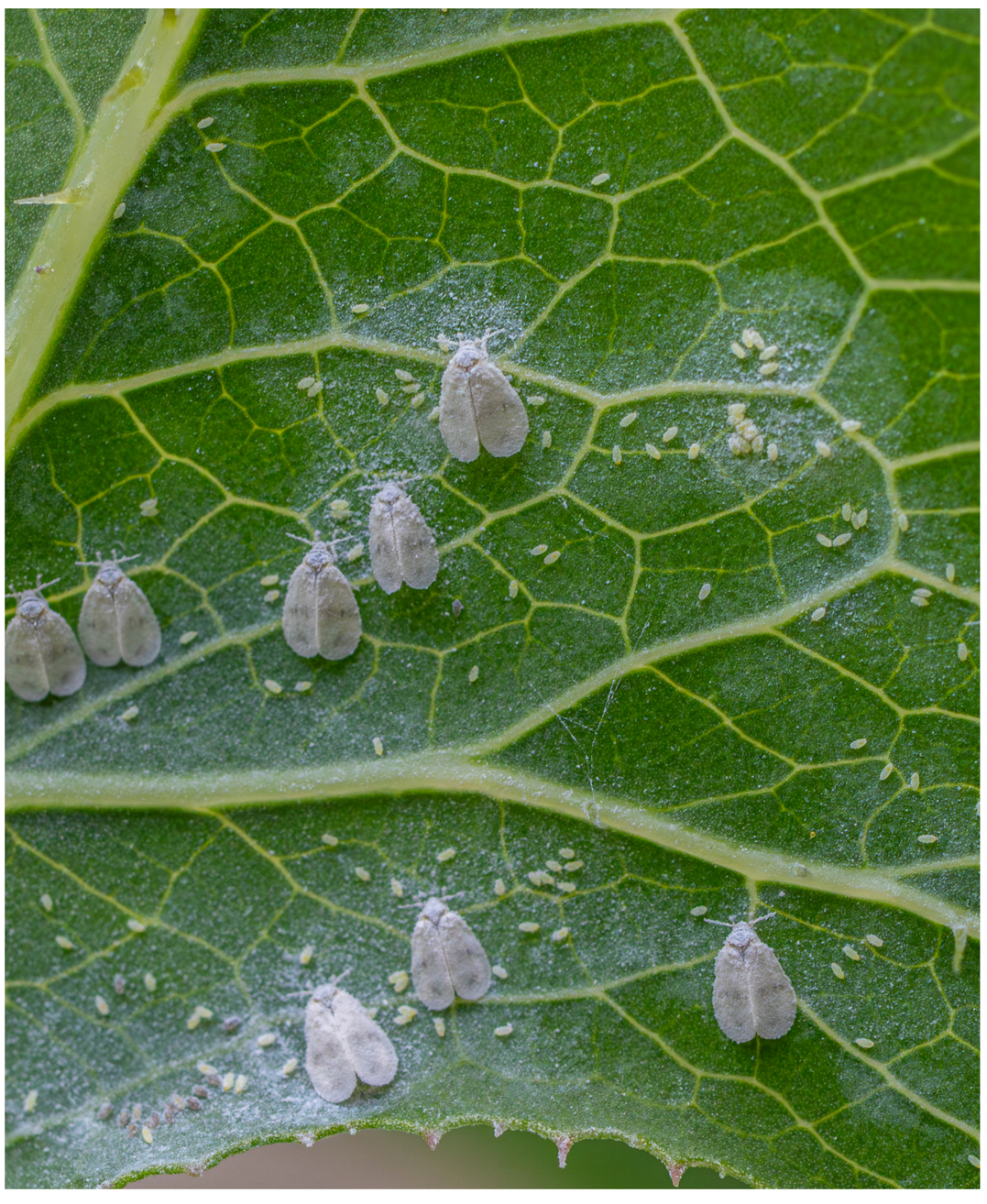
Physical barriers are another low-cost option. Collars made from toilet paper tubes or cut-up plastic bottles protect seedlings from cutworms. Screens made from window screen material keep insects off plants. Netting or bird netting keeps birds and larger pests away from berries and tender greens.

I know hand-picking pests isn't pleasant, but it works, and it's free. I spend 10-15 minutes every few days walking through the garden and removing visible pests. It's become part of my routine, and it's kept pest damage to manageable levels without spending money on controls.

Common Mistakes / Watch-Outs

The most common mistake with pest management is waiting too long to act. A few aphids are manageable. A hundred aphids are a serious problem. Check plants regularly and address issues when they're small.

Another mistake is overreacting to minor damage. A few chewed leaves aren't a crisis. Plants can tolerate 10-20% leaf damage without any impact on yield. Save your effort for serious problems.



A third mistake is using too much homemade spray or using it incorrectly. Soap spray, for example, must contact pests to work—it doesn't have residual activity. Spraying once and expecting pests to disappear won't work. You need to spray repeatedly and thoroughly.

With companion planting, the mistake is expecting it to solve all problems. Companion planting helps, but it's not a replacement for good cultural practices and monitoring.



Finally, watch out for the temptation to buy expensive pest control products when you're frustrated. Most pest problems can be solved with the free methods I've described. Give them time to work before you spend money.

Closing Thoughts

Gardening on a tight budget is not about accepting inferior results or settling for less. It's about being resourceful, using what's available, and prioritizing effort over expense. The methods I've described in this guide work—they've worked for me, and they've worked for countless other people who needed to grow food without spending money.

The first season or two will require more effort because you're building systems from scratch. You're sourcing free materials, establishing composting routines, saving seeds, and learning what works in your conditions. But after that initial investment of time and effort, the garden largely maintains itself. You'll have saved seeds, established soil fertility, and built infrastructure that lasts for years.

You won't have the prettiest garden on the block. Your beds might be cardboard and free compost instead of cedar raised beds. Your trellises might be lashed

branches instead of decorative tuteurs. Your tools might be secondhand instead of shiny and new. But your garden will produce food, and it will do it at a cost that's close to zero.

I started with $28 and a determination to figure out how to grow food without money. Fifteen years later, I spend less than $20 per year on my garden—mostly on the occasional seed variety I want to try or a replacement tool when something breaks. Everything else is free or grown from saved seeds, and the garden produces abundantly year after year.

If you're in a situation where money is tight and you need to grow food, this approach works. It requires resourcefulness, effort, and patience, but it's absolutely feasible. Don't let lack of money stop you from starting. Use what you have, find what you need for free, and build from there.