Surprising health benefits of backyard gardening

Healthier diet.
People who grow vegetables and fruits are encouraged to have a healthier diet.

Vitamin D exposure.
Outdoor activities, like gardening, are a way perfect to get your sunshine which stimulates Vitamin D production in your skin. Vitamin D is necessary for healthy bones and a strong immune system.

Physical activity.
Pulling weeds, digging, pruning, using tools, bending and stretching as you plant will work new muscles in your body and help with strength, stamina, and flexibility.

Strong immune system.
Physical activity, Vitamin D exposure and exposure to microorganisms in the soil may help people, especially young children, build immunity against many types of diseases.

Mood-boosting/stress relief.
Gardening may have a calming effect by reducing the amount of stress hormones (cortisol) in the body. Children who spend more time outdoors may feel less stressed and sleep better.

Low-cost & household food security.
Planting a garden is the best way to save on food costs and provide a long-term source of food for you and your family.

Connecting with others.
Connecting with others boosts our well-being and backyard gardening provides opportunities to build relationships with our family and friends.

With so many benefits, what are you waiting for? Start off small by growing a few indoor plants, easy to grow herbs/fruits/vegetables or produce that your family likes to eat, then work your way up to a bigger garden.

Easy to Grow...

Plants
- Sweet pepper
- Callaloo
- Pak choi
- Peas & beans (pigeon peas, string beans etc)
- Cucumbers
- Squash
- Okra
- Eggplant
- Tomato
- Cabbage
- Pumpkin
- Lettuce
- Carrots

Herbs
- Basil
- Parsley
- Rosemary
- Thyme
- Mint
- Cilantro
- Bay leaf
- Scallion
- Onion
- Garlic

Tips to start your backyard garden
**BASIC STEPS - GET YOUR GARDEN STARTED**

1. **SITE**

   Pick a garden site (or place where you will keep your potted crops) with access to sunlight and water for irrigation. You don’t need a lot of space, an 8’ by 5’ plot with 10-12 inches of soil is enough to grow some plants.

   Plant beds need to be about 6 to 8’ deep; wooden enclosures for beds or concrete blocks work well to prevent the soil from washing away with watering. Wooden ones can be constructed with 2’ x 8’ or 1’ x 8’ lumber. Four-inch concrete blocks are even better.

   If you have limited land space, try containerized gardening using a range of containers e.g. old tyres, large plastic bottles, ceramic bowls, clay/plastic pots, drums cut into two halves. Other options include roof top farming and vertical gardening. Vegetables need containers with at least six to eight inches of soil depth to form a healthy roots.

2. **SEEDS**

   Collect a variety of seeds from local, easy-to-grow fruits and vegetables. Fresh seeds are best.

   Remember some plants or vines produce a plant that bears many vegetables (like eggplant, peppers, cucumbers, pumpkin) so you don’t need many seeds/plants. Others produce a single vegetable (e.g. carrots, beets, lettuce, cabbage) so you need many seeds for those. Start seeds in small containers like egg cartons and later transplant seedlings to the garden.

3. **SOIL**

   If you have compost, mix it in with your soil. Save all the fruit and vegetable skins from your cooking, dig them into the soil so that they provide nutrition for the soil. This is called composting. Container-grown plants do best in a soil mix: 1 part soil : 1 part sand: 1 part organic matter (compost).

4. **YOU’RE READY TO PLANT!**

   - If you are using containers, punch holes in the bottom and sides. fill with the soil and firm the soil to just below the top edge.
   - Water the soil until moist.
   - Plant the seeds/suckers. Some can be sown directly into the soil.
   - Cover the seeds with soil. The rule of thumb is to cover the seed to the depth of twice the seed size.
   - Give plants lots of sunlight once they sprout.
   - Water plants regularly for adequate moisture, but avoid excessive watering which will cause water-logging. Water plants early morning and evening to ensure the roots can soak up the water they need.
   - Keep the soil moist but not soggy. Covering the bed with cuttings of grass and rotted leaves will give protection from the sun. This is what we call ‘mulching’. It will stop water from evaporating too quickly and prevent weeds from growing.
   - Weeds in your garden rob the plants of food and water so remove them as early as possible.
   - Protect the area from animals/wind e.g. with a fence

5. **GIVE THEM ROOM**

   Give them some room. Some plants i.e. (tomatoes) need to be potted into a large pot after 4-6 weeks of growth. Vegetables need adequate space to develop properly and prevent conditions for disease build-up.

   Plant vines near the edge so they can ‘run’ alongside the vegetable bed. Plant larger type plant (eggplant, tomato) to the rear of your garden.

6. **TAKE CARE OF PESTS & DISEASES**

   To control insect infestation, plant marigold flowers in between plants or you may make your own simple pesticide by 2-3 tablespoons (15-30 ml) of liquid soap per 4 litres water.

   Garlic and onions, properly blended, filtered and sprayed on plants will also act as a repellant to insects. Wood ash will control cutworms and slugs.

7. **HARVEST & ENJOY**

   Most vegetables are ready for harvest within three months. Callaloo, lettuce, cucumber, may be reaped after about six weeks; tomato, pepper, red peas require three months.

8. **ENGAGE FAMILY/NEIGHBOURS**

   Use the opportunity to teach children a new skill and encourage your neighbours and family to start their own garden.