

HOW TO... grow your OWN

Think it's impossible to have a thriving vegetable patch in the desert? Excuses, excuses. Read on to find out how those with enough will have found a way

Yes, it is sandy. Yes it is hot. But there are plenty of people having great success growing their own fruits and vegetables in this sandpit – and many of them are not experienced gardeners, they're just 'having a go'. People are growing everything from cucumbers and chillies to figs and mangoes, in their gardens, in pots, on their balconies and even sometimes in their bedrooms. What makes them do it? The thrill of eating something you have watched grow from a seed. The good, wholesome feeling you get from knowing that the food on your plate is organic. Oh, and the unbeatable taste.

But how do they go about it? We spoke to some industry experts and some home-growing talents to get the lowdown on how to grow-your-own.

EXCUSE NUMBER ONE

"We don't have a garden"

Solution: Get creative

THE PROOF Hayley Ross Macdonald is the founder of Be Supernatural (besupernatural.com), an online store for raw, organic, ethically sourced superfoods, servicing the UAE. Until she moved into a villa eight months ago, Hayley was growing all manner of fruits and vegetables on her balcony and in her apartment. She says, "We grew lots of veggies, like tomatoes, herbs and cucumbers on our balcony and we even grew stuff inside. We weren't sure if the plants would grow inside but we decided to give it a try and replaced all our indoor houseplants with veggie plants. They grew really well – we grew tomatoes, chillies, peppers and herbs inside, and we grew wheatgrass in cat litter trays, which we stacked on top of each other in a cheap storage trolley on wheels from Ikea. Wheatgrass is really easy to grow, but you have to keep cats away from it as they love it. My suggestion is that if you're using pots, try growing broccoli, rocket, herbs, tomatoes, chillies and bell peppers."

"We really enjoy growing our own vegetables – not only are they organic and fresh, but they taste better, too"
Hayley Ross Macdonald



"For about five weeks of the growing season we are totally self-sufficient in tomatoes. We always have chillies and aubergines, which we grow from seed, and we grow cucumbers up a trellis. We have a constant supply of herbs... basil grows like a weed"
Susan Castle

EXCUSE NUMBER TWO

"It's too hot for anything to grow here"

Solution: Is it? Is it really?

THE PROOF James Balderstone and his wife Becky set up Ripe (ripeme.com) – the weekly organic farmers' markets offering organic vegetable boxes – last year. As well as dealing with local organic farmers, they also grow their own veggies at home. James says, "The UAE climate is great for growing vegetables and we see stuff doing well all year round out on the farms we deal with. More UAE farmers are going organic and we are getting a good supply and variety of quality produce throughout the year – so it is possible. Veggies that grow well in winter include pumpkins, cucumbers, bell peppers and chillies. In spring, aubergines, potatoes, courgettes and onions do well. Herbs and tomatoes do well most of the year, but may need protection from the sun over the summer."

EXCUSE NUMBER THREE

You can buy organic now, so why bother?

Solution: Because you get more of a feel-good factor when you grow your own

THE PROOF Life coach and keen gardener, Susan Castle, says: "I've just grown pineapple for the first time... I cut the top off a pineapple and planted it in some soil and it has grown, which is exciting. We've got oranges too, on a miniature orange tree that a friend gave me about seven years ago. The fruit's a bit bitter but it's good for marmalade. I don't think anybody grows to save money... you do it more for the satisfaction and for the taste. At Taste of Dubai I told Gary Rhodes that I'd made his famous white tomato soup and that I'd made it better than him. He looked shocked and asked me how. When I told him the tomatoes had come off my own plants he said that was cheating!"

James says, "The great thing about growing your own fruits and vegetables is not only that they are organic and they taste better, but also that they haven't been shipped from the other side of the world. As soon as you pick something off a plant, the nutrition value starts decreasing. So, the longer the time between plant and plate, the less nutritious it is. At our Ripe markets, the produce is picked that morning and can be on your plate by lunchtime, which means it'll still be packed full of its nutrients. But when you can walk out in to your garden, pick a tomato off a plant and put it straight in your mouth – what could be better than that?"

EXCUSE NUMBER FOUR

“It takes too much time”

Solution: It takes as much time as you want it to take

THE PROOF Jo Marengo is one half of the dynamic team which brought Bokashi (bokashidubai.com) home-composting bins to Dubai in 2009. She says, “Personally, I grow simply because I can... I enjoy it but, between running two companies and living a busy life, I don’t have much time to spend on it. I just go with the flow. If something is doing well, I leave it. If it isn’t doing well, I move it around until it’s in a place where it is happier. This winter I’ve had tomatoes, bitter melon, sweet potatoes, kale, radishes and carrots.”

“It’s just fantastic to make a salad with your own produce grown in your garden. And I don’t care what anyone else says, it does taste different. Organic definitely tastes better, whether it is bought or home-grown.”
Jo Marengo

EXCUSE NUMBER FIVE

“My garden is just sand. No amount of soil will make anything grow”

Solution: Make your own compost

THE PROOF Jo says, “A lot of our Bokashi clients grow their own fruit and veggies and we’ve seen many people having a lot of success, especially over the last year. We get a lot of business from people in the Greens who grow on their balconies and some schools are doing well with vegetable gardens using Bokashi.” Hayley and Susan both swear by the power of Bokashi and put a lot of their growing success down to it. Hayley says, “Bokashi really makes a difference... I’ve seen dead plants come back to life just by being chucked into a pot with Bokashi. We were given two dead lemon trees for free. We put them in a pot with Bokashi and now they’re thriving.” Susan agrees: “Bokashi makes a huge difference... the soil here doesn’t have any solid structure beneath it so it dries out very quickly. Bokashi helps hold the water and puts nutrients back into the soil. I find it so satisfying to be able to put anything going off in the fridge into the Bokashi bin and to know it isn’t going to waste.”

EXCUSE NUMBER SIX

“I go away for the summer”

Solution: Close the patch down and wait for autumn

THE PROOF Although some people manage to grow right through the summer, most hobby-gardeners leave their vegetable patches to rest over the summer period and start planting again the following autumn. Susan says, “Our garden goes to bed for the summer. We pull all our tomatoes out about April time and plant corn, which is great for cleaning the soil and getting rid of mildew. Over the summer, we dig Bokashi compost into the soil until it’s time to start planting again.” James says, “We grow our own vegetables at home, but we don’t have the resources that the farms have, so many of our plants start dying off around the beginning of April and we’ll leave it until after the summer before we plant again.”

GOLDEN GROWING TIPS

SUSAN “I’m a bit ‘new age’ about it all and always plant on the full moon. When buying seeds, opt for Australian seeds rather than European seeds as they seem to be better suited to the climate. If you’re growing in pots, make sure the pot doesn’t overheat as it will cook the roots.”

JO “I’ve grown all my plants from seed. First in seed trays, then to pots, and then to the ground.”

HAYLEY “We keep the seeds from everything we eat. We dry them out and save them for planting. We’re ending up

with so many seeds that we are thinking of starting a seed exchange through Be Supernatural, so that the growing community can share their seeds with each other.”

JAMES “There’s not really a set time to plant the seeds – just when the heat dies down. But you can have a problem if you plant too soon because, if the heat spikes again, it can burn the seeds in the ground so they don’t germinate.”



For more planting ideas and inspiration, check out the Aquarius Edit May App.