

15 mistakes
first-time gardeners
make
and how to avoid them



By Jill McSheehy

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You know the saying, “you don’t know what you don’t know?”

I’d say that’s true of so many things in life, but it’s especially the case in gardening. First-time gardeners can read all the books and garden articles, but until they actually start working in the garden, they don’t know what challenges lie ahead or what they might face in their particular environment.

I know that was me as I set out to plant my first garden in the spring of 2013. I had spent months in garden research, but I felt like a brand new college graduate with a plethora of head knowledge but no life experience.

We all have to start somewhere. And as long-time gardeners will tell you, the learning and failing is part of the fun.

But, what I wouldn’t give for someone to have told me what I could have avoided — those simple things that veteran gardeners know as a way of life but new gardeners don’t even think to ask.

What follows is a list I’ve compiled, along with the generous input of members of my free Facebook Group, [the Beginner’s Garden Shortcut](#), of the most common mistakes we’ve made as beginners and how to avoid those mistakes.

My hope is that you will find this resource helpful for skipping these common mistakes and getting on your way to a successful garden.



HI, I'M JILL, AND I STARTED MY FIRST GARDEN IN 2013, MAKING MOST OF THESE MISTAKES MYSELF.

Mistake #1: Selecting Planting Dates Based on Online Garden Charts

Crop	Date to Plant Seeds	OR Date to Transplant in the Garden
Tomatoes	Feb. 14	Apr. 8
Peppers	Feb. 14	May 1
Potatoes		Mar. 1
Onions	Jan. 24	Feb. 14
Early lettuce		Feb. 24
Lettuce 1 / Arugula		Mar. 1
Lettuce 2 / Arugula		Mar. 15
Carrots / Radish		Feb. 24
Peas		Mar. 8
Cucumbers		Apr. 1
Summer Squash (early)	Mar. 15	Apr. 8
Summer squash		Apr. 15
Beans		Apr. 22
Watermelon (early)	Apr. 1	Apr. 22
Watermelon / Cantaloupe		Apr. 15
Corn 1		May 31
Corn 2		May 1
OKra		May 1
Black-eyed Peas		July 1
	Feb. 14	Apr. 8

I would venture to speculate that the most common question for first-time gardeners is when to plant what. And well-meaning gardeners create charts with planting dates and publish them online, not realizing that planting dates vary greatly. But perhaps even more confusing is when people think planting dates are based on a gardener's zone.

But zones only tell you what the average minimum temperature for any given place is. It doesn't tell you your first and last average frost date; therefore, it cannot tell you when to plant.

How to avoid it:

Don't rely on any planting chart based on your zone. Instead, use charts and tools that base planting times on your zip code. Although multiple apps and tools can do this, my new favorite is the planting calendar at <https://garden.org/apps/calendar/>.

Related resources:

[What Your Garden Zone Tells You and What it Doesn't
When to Plant What](#)

Mistake #2: Starting Seeds Indoors without a Grow Light



My first time to try starting seeds indoors, I assumed my south and west facing corner windows would provide ample light for my seedlings. Sadly, I was mistaken. Only after that disappointing start did I decide to buy a grow light the next season. It was then I realized how important a grow light is for the successful start of indoor seedlings.

I know I'm not alone, as I see thin, leggy plants stretching to the windows of unsuspecting gardeners' homes every year.

How to avoid it: Buy a grow light. You can get an inexpensive LED light if you're just starting and you're not growing more than a couple dozen seedlings. Or you could go all out and purchase a larger fluorescent light.

Related Resources:

[How to Start Seeds Indoors](#) (includes links to my recommended grow lights)

[Seed Starting Mistakes](#)

Mistake #3: Planting Vegetables too Close Together



With all the online talk of “intensive planting,” it’s hard not to get excited about the possibility of fitting more vegetables in a small space. In my experience, intensive planting success depends on a variety of factors — many of which first-time gardeners can’t control or don’t know about quite yet.

The problem is, when you plant your vegetables too close together, you risk lower yields if the soil fertility can’t sustain that many plants. And you risk disease exacerbated by a lack of airflow, among other issues.

Interestingly, this is the most commonly mentioned advice I hear from gardeners when we talk about past mistakes. If that many beginning gardeners talk about it, it's worth heeding their advice.

How to avoid it: Pay attention to the soil planting instructions on the back of seed packets or instructions you can find online for specific varieties. Seed catalogs are also a good source for this information, as different varieties of the same vegetable can require different spacing. Keep in mind, more is not always better. As a general rule, keep in mind that a single vegetable with ample access to water and nutrients will outperform two plants competing for the same water and nutrients.

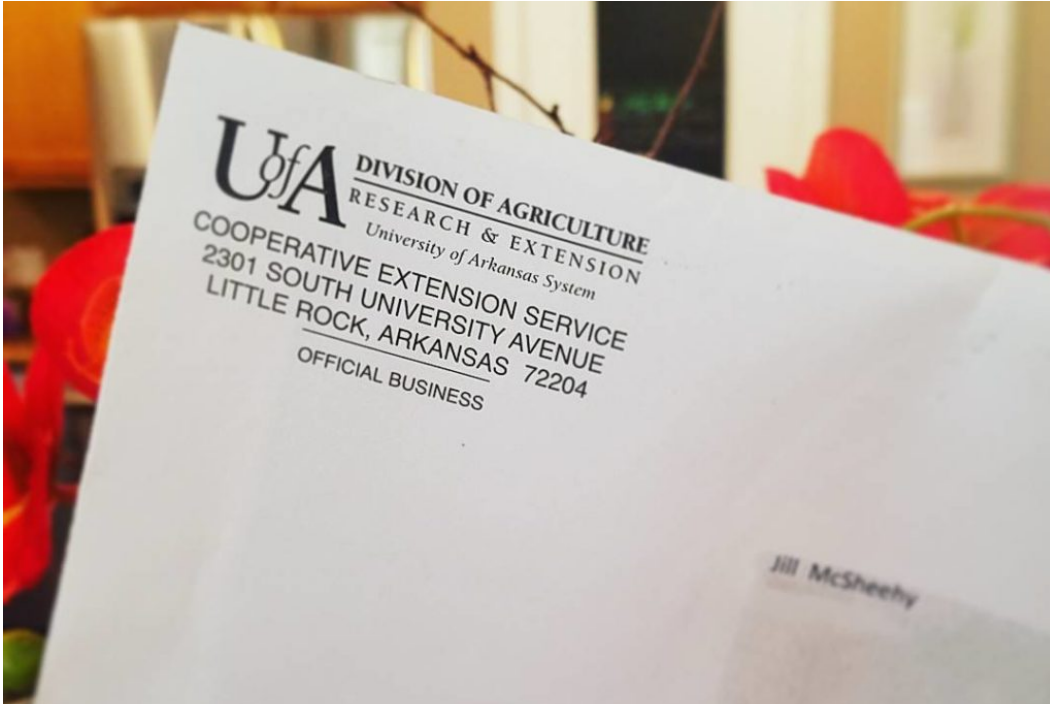
Related Resources:

In my [Simple Garden Planner](#), I provide a spacing guide near the layout section for the planner to help you keep your plantings properly spaced.



[CLICK HERE TO VIEW THE SIMPLE GARDEN PLANNER, AVAILABLE IN BOTH SPIRAL-BOUND AND AS A PRINTABLE DOWNLOAD.](#)

Mistake #4: Fertilizing without a Soil Test



As a beginning gardener, I was enamored with all the “natural” ways to fertilize my plants — banana peels, coffee grounds, egg shells, and epsom salts to name a few. It all seemed so good! But the more I learn about soil fertility, what plants actually need, and what nutrients are available at any given time to a plant, I realized there’s more to feeding our plants than this.

While any of these options could help your plants, they’re not the “magic bullet” that they appear to be. And with the exception of epsom salt (because too much salt can *hurt* your soil), adding organic matter is always a good idea — making banana peels, coffee grounds, and egg shells great additions to your garden.

The problem lies when we believe (as I did for a number of years) that, for example, adding egg shells to the planting holes of my tomatoes would alone prevent blossom end rot. I do know that a lack of calcium uptake causes blossom end rot, but does my soil even need more calcium? Or could it be that my soil pH is too low (acidic soil can inhibit calcium uptake)?

While it's easy to get discouraged at all the "what ifs," you're going to be more discouraged if you add what you think will help your plants and it doesn't help like you thought.

How to avoid it: The best way to know what your plants (and your soil) need is to have a soil test. You can more accurately provide supplemental nutrients without guessing at what your plants can use.

Related Resources:

[A Beginner's Guide to Soil Testing](#)

[Soil Test Comparison: University Lab vs. Home Test](#)

Mistake #5: Panicked Pest Control



I remember one of my biggest fears as I prepared for my first garden — pests. I had read about the myriad of different bugs that could threaten my crops, but I had no way of knowing which ones would visit my garden.

When my potatoes drew in the Colorado Potato Beetle, I panicked. This was before I understood the importance of organic gardening in the home garden, so I set out to find whatever I could to kill these beetles. Sevin Dust to the rescue.

I cringe now, just thinking of my strategy in year one. But I didn't know what I didn't know. I didn't consider that pesticides — even natural ones — might

kill beneficial insects that would have naturally found these pest insects and feasted on them. All I thought about was killing the bad guys.

Now, after five years of an organic approach to gardening, and only using organic pesticides as a last resort, I rarely have problems with pests. My natural beneficial insect population keeps many of them in check. I plant at different times of the year to avoid certain persistent enemies like the squash vine borer. I hand-pick when I can, and I use floating row covers to create a barrier against pests like the cabbage worm.

How to avoid it: First, get rid of your Sevin dust and any other chemical pesticide. With it gone, you won't be tempted to bring it out in a panic. Then, take a step back and look at your garden as a whole, interconnected web of plants and insects. Understand that each time you apply an insecticide — even an organic one — you could threaten beneficial insects such as ladybugs, lacewings, bees, and a myriad of others.

Related Resources:

[Managing Pests in the Organic Home Garden](#)

[Gardening Without Pesticides: Prevention and Management](#)

Mistake #6: Planting Too Early



After a long winter, a few warm, spring days can lull us into thinking it's planting time. The temptation to rush our planting is real! In my early years I took a risk, but those happened to end up being years of early springs. Since then I've seen late cold snaps that have killed ambitious gardeners' prized plantings in a night.

Not only is planting out too early essentially gambling with the life of your plant, but it also puts undue stress on a plant in its earliest, most tender stages. Vegetables thrive when the conditions around them are right. Even if you *can* plant them early, it isn't always beneficial.

How to avoid it: Write your planting dates on a calendar ahead of time and stick to them, even when warm days tempt you to move up the planting. If you're starting seeds indoors, don't start them too early because it's even harder not to plant outdoors when you know your seedlings are outgrowing their containers. (Keeping seedlings in too small containers stresses them just like planting out too early.) Also, when your average last frost date approaches (or passes), check your 10-day forecast daily. Look for patterns in low temperatures. If low temperatures hover in the low 40s (or lower), wait to plant summer plants until those lows stay consistently in the 50s.

Related Resources:

My [Complete Garden Planner](#), which includes my [Monthly Garden Planner](#), is a great way to write out your planting dates ahead of time.

[When to Plant What](#)

[Find Your Average Last and First Frost Date based on Zip Code](#)

Mistake #7: Not Protecting Garden from Wildlife



I'll never forget the first time I walked out to my garden to find all of my strawberry and broccoli plants chewed to the nub. It was my first season, and my heart dropped. All the effort in planning. All the work in planting. Gone.

I wish I could say the first time ended up being the last, but unfortunately, wildlife continue to test our methods of protecting our garden.

How to avoid it: First, be proactive. Don't assume wildlife won't see your garden as an all-you-can-eat buffet. In your first year, you may not know whether to watch out for deer, rabbits, or other wildlife, but you can prevent them. In my experience, use caution in implementing some of the old time

remedies that have no scientific evidence to back them. Do you really want to risk your garden on a hope? Also, understand that many of those remedies (like garlic pepper spray on leaves) must be reapplied frequently. In my experience, constructing a barrier — some type of fencing — is the best prevention. Even if you can't build a full-on fence (although this is recommended for deer), a little chicken wire will go a long way toward protecting your crops from smaller wildlife.

Mistake #8: Waiting too Long to Set up Irrigation



In the winter and spring, irrigation often doesn't cross our minds. But once that first dry spell hits, you will wish you had thought ahead. You'll either spend way too much time watering by hand or you'll allow your garden to go thirsty, not being able to keep up.

How to avoid it: Decide on an irrigation plan while you're planning your garden. Simple soil-level irrigation systems such as soaker hoses and drip emitter tubing will not only conserve water but also apply it directly to where the plants need it. These systems are best set up at the time of planting, while your plants are still small.

Mistake #9: Not Mulching

When we're planning our gardens in the winter and spring, we don't think about the very real problem that weeds will cause us in a few months. Not only will mulching help cut down on your labor during the hottest parts of the summer, but it also serves a vital role in the regulation of moisture and soil temperature. Plus, weed pressure will hurt your harvest as your plants compete with weeds for water and nutrients.

How to avoid it: Consider your mulch options and plan ahead. Call local tree companies and ask for wood chip mulch to be delivered when they are working in your area. Price various mulch options at local nurseries and landscape companies. Plan to start applying your mulch a couple of weeks after your last frost date, after the soil temperature has warmed and your plants are starting to grow.



Related Resources:

[4 Types of Mulch You Can Use in Your Garden](#)

Mistake #10: Using Small Tomato Cages for Large Tomato Varieties



Different types of tomatoes require different staking methods. I'm pretty sure most gardeners will tell you that unless they had someone guide them early, they've learned this the hard way.

We see the three-foot round cages at our garden centers and assume all tomatoes can use these cages equally, but they do not. Larger,

indeterminate tomatoes will quickly outgrow these cages and the fruit will weigh them down, sometimes bending them and knocking them over.

How to avoid it: Use these smaller cages, instead, for cherry tomatoes, determinate tomatoes, dwarf tomatoes, and tomatillos. For the vining, indeterminate tomatoes, use a larger cage like one constructed by concrete mesh. Or prune them to a single stem and attach to one tall stake.

Related Resources:

[4 Tomato Trellis Ideas for the Beginner](#)

Mistake #11: Failing to Thin Seedlings



We plant seeds, either indoors or in the ground, with no certainty how many (if any) will sprout. Planting seeds, I think, is a huge leap of faith for first-time gardeners. That's why we probably plant too many at once. Just in case.

And while I'd rather plant too many over too few, a problem arises when more seedlings sprout than we expected. We bristle at the seed packet that says to "thin seedlings."

It's just as hard for me to cut a seedling's life short while it's in its infancy. But I have to remember it's necessary. Just like planting vegetable plants too close together can hurt your harvest, failing to cull extra sprouts can have the same detrimental effect.

How to avoid it: Know when you plant your seeds how far apart the seedlings need to be. As they begin growing, set aside time to clip extra sprouts at the base. In the case of sprouts like beets, arugula, cabbage, and carrots, pluck them and throw them into salads for a tasty, nutrient-dense addition! Instant microgreens!

Related Resources:

[A Planting Mistake that Will Hurt Your Harvest](#)

Mistake #12: Not Walking the Garden Daily



I love to walk my garden. In the dead of winter to the scorching heat of summer — and everything in between. But I get it when life gets in the way, or when we just don't feel like walking outside, sometimes we can let days go by without checking on our gardens.

Depending on the size of your garden, you may not have to work in it daily, but it's always a good idea to check on it daily. If you don't, you may find pests and disease have taken hold that you could have done something about had you caught it early.

It's been said the best fertilizer is a gardener's shadow, and I firmly believe that. So much can be caught and prevented just by keeping a keen eye on our prized plants.

How to avoid it: You've worked so hard to start a garden. Make it a daily routine to visit it. I love walking my garden in the cool of the morning with coffee in hand. It's also a relaxing way to end the day. On your walk, put a small notebook in your pocket, and make a list of anything you need to do or research.

Mistake #13: Trying to Grow Sun-Loving Plants in the Shade



I see it every year. Ambitious gardeners plant a garden in what they believe is the perfect space, only to find their vegetables struggling to grow. Of course, many factors could contribute to stunted growth, but more often than not, I find shade to be the biggest one.

Most of the time it's because the most convenient place for a garden happens to be near a tree, and perhaps we can't find a sunnier location. Or maybe we didn't realize how much shade a tree would cast when in full leaf.

Plants that are grown for the “fruit” like tomatoes, zucchini, melons, etc., prefer full sun — a minimum of 6 but preferably 8 or more — hours of direct sunlight per day.

How to avoid it: Before planting sun-loving vegetables, ensure the location will receive the minimum amount of sunlight needed. If not, consider an alternative location, even at the sacrifice of convenience. It will save you frustration. If another location isn't possible, or if your yard is full of shade, plant more shade-tolerant crops like leafy greens.

Related Resources:

[44 Nutritious Vegetables that Will Grow in Shady Areas in Your Garden](#)

Mistake #14: Planting Too Many Varieties



When we first begin our gardens — really, who am I kidding, this happens to all of us! — we can go a bit overboard in choosing what we want to grow. This leads to overcrowding (as discussed above), but it can also lead to having to manage more than you can handle. The last thing you want to do as a first-time gardener is experience burnout. It's always best to start small and gain the confidence to go bigger than to start too big and find your garden a burden.

How to avoid it: Stick to the basics. Identify your garden goals and plant only around what's important to you. Don't worry about growing fancy varieties this first season (okay, maybe just one of two for the fun of it). Work on growing what's really important and learning what works and what doesn't in your garden.

Related Resources:

[What to Plant in Your Garden](#)

[First Steps in Garden Planning](#)

Mistake #15: Not Planning Early Enough

What I've found over the years is that the earlier I start planning my garden, the more efficient my garden is. This leads to more joy on my part and more success, since I'm spreading out the labor and I'm planning strategically. My garden planning starts on Christmas Day, though many gardeners find planning in January and February to serve them well.

But many first-time gardeners only decide they want a garden when the spring weather starts to arrive. If that's you, let me assure you — you can have a successful garden this year! But you have to do one of two things: buckle up and plan on stealth mode, or temper your expectations for this first season. In other words, start small. Look at this year as a learning year, and plan to start your planning earlier next season.

How to avoid it: Pick a date to start planning your garden. No matter what time of year you start the process, always take time to plan before you ever plant anything.



THE BEGINNER'S GARDEN QUICKSTART GUIDE
EBOOK AVAILABLE HERE

Related Resources:

My Online Course, the Beginner's Garden Shortcut, takes you step by step and helps you plan your garden. This course is open from late December through late March. [Click here for more information.](#)

If you're reading this after March, or if you prefer to read, my eBook, you can get those same step-by-step instructions in my eBook, [the Beginner's Garden Shortcut QuickStart Guide](#).

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I hope this guide has proven helpful for you in avoiding mistakes that first-time gardeners make. Whether you're beginning your first garden or looking to tighten up your skills, I hope you'll go back through this guide and read the "Related Resources" linked throughout to help you as you plan and grow your garden this year!

I hope you'll connect further with me on my web site: <http://journeywithjill.net> and on my podcast, the Beginner's Garden Podcast, available wherever you listen to podcasts.

Happy Gardening!