

PLANT CARE

Weeding, watering, controlling pests

There is no doubt that keeping your garden productive and healthy requires some care and attention, some might even describe it as work, though others think of it as ‘therapy’ or ‘sanity time’. Most of us are so busy with all we try to fit into our lives that the time involved in caring for an edible garden might seem like a good reason not to get started in food production at all. The good news is that steps taken in the setting up stage can minimise ongoing maintenance. Once you become involved in the fascinating cycle of seasonal changes and the satisfaction of cooking and eating food you have produced yourself, garden maintenance will seem like an innate part of life, a reconnection with the natural world that will bring many far-reaching benefits, as discussed in Chapter 1.

Weed control

Some gardeners regard weeds with loathing. I am not one of them. Weeds are free mulch as long as you don’t let them go to seed. Many weeds have long been used as food and folk medicine. Even if you never use them as such, the knowledge that cultures around the world have benefited, and continue to benefit, from these humble plants might help to change your mind-set.

EDIBLE WEEDS

Weeds you can eat include chickweed, clover, dandelion, dock, plantain and stinging nettle. The young leaves can be used in salad mixes or added to soup. Teas can be made from the leaves of blackberry, cleavers and fennel; use them alone or mixed with more well-known herbal teas such as lemon balm, mint, sage, marjoram and thyme. Never consume weeds in any form unless you are sure of their identification and are also sure they have not been contaminated in any way, such as by agricultural chemicals or by vehicle emissions if they were growing near a busy road. Stinging nettles do sting, so wear gloves to harvest them.

Always begin with a weed-free bed or planting hole and future weed problems will be vastly reduced. Any that do grow can be easily removed by some simple techniques; there is no need to let weeding become a daunting back-breaking task. Some weeds have deep roots that aerate the soil and bring up nutrients from lower levels in the soil that might not otherwise be available to plants. Letting them decompose under newspaper or cardboard sheet mulch, or solarising them, will feed the earthworms and other soil biota