

## **Survival Gardening Tip: Keep It Simple**

There's an endless search on for the easiest way to garden. The fool-proof method. The no-work approach. The incredibly productive strategy.

Here's a sample of ideas you may have encountered:

- Self-watering Earthboxes
- Tower Gardens
- Plastic bottle hydroponics
- Gutter gardening
- Trash-can potatoes
- PVC pipe gardening
- Straw bale gardening
- Gardening in bags of soil
- Olla pot irrigation
- 4-season greenhouse gardening
- Strawberry barrel gardening
- Dripline irrigated rows

...and lots and lots more

Now I'm not going to condemn all these methods. Many of them are quite clever and may be perfect for your area, particularly in your in a marginal food-growing area. My main problem with most of them is that in a grid-down situation, or in a post Peak Oil scenario, or even during a time of runaway inflation or a shipping strike or some sort, you may get stuck.

The ideal survival garden is dead simple, and a lot of these methods purport to be easy short-cuts to growing your own food. The concern is, however, that the methods are too complex or driven by outside inputs to work well in a crisis.

Before I go further, let me say this: if you're growing your own food, however you're doing it, you're better off than the many people who aren't growing anything at all. If it takes an irrigation system divided into carefully timed sectors and automatic sprinklers to keep you producing edibles, that's a lot better than doing nothing.

That caveat aside, I have some worries.

Let's pretend you're on city water and electricity. Let's further pretend that you've set up the coolest danged tilapia-raising/cabbage-growing/self-filtering aquaponics system this side of Star Trek. What do you do if the power goes off... or your access to easy water dries up?

This isn't a hypothetical question. I have a friend who raises tilapia and salads in a greenhouse. It's cool as heck and totally worth seeing. Yet on two separate occasions, he's lost a bunch of his fish because of minor flaws that weren't caught until it was too late. At one point his aeration valve locked up while his pump continued to empty water from the system. Overnight, a tank drained and by the time he saw it the next morning, he had a bunch of dead fish.

This is sad but not life-threatening right now. But if those fish were needed to feed the family because there were no other options left, he would have been in big trouble. Sometimes one little problem can really mess up a complicated system.

Part of the reason our nation is in such trouble is because the American banking system – and the international banking system – kept bundling, repackaging, leveraging and building vast castles of wealth on top of a shaky and increasingly incomprehensible system of debt-backed paper money. In gardening terms, they moved far away from the simplicities of dirt, sunlight, digging and seeding... and the resulting crash created an ongoing Depression with no end in sight.

My advice to new gardeners and those who hope to feed themselves through future cataclysms is the same thing I learned when I was a journalist: KISS. That's short for Keep It Simple, Stupid!

You may be facing tough conditions on your property. Perhaps the soil is too alkaline... or comprised of hard clay... or, heaven forbid, you're in the city and have a shady lot thanks to your neighbor's trees.

The temptation is to look for an easier way... but sometimes, you can't have ease and security at the same time. If a squirrel chews through your irrigation hoses, will you be able to replace them? If a hurricane knocks down your greenhouse, can you still grow? If the power goes off, will your well work? If not, learn to trap water on your property.

Some of the methods above are pretty simple. The difficulties arise in doing them on a large enough scale to feed yourself.

A few generations back, gardening required skill and hard work, but little in the way of infrastructure. If you stay in shape, own some good tools and consistently add homemade compost and build your soil, you can grow food almost anywhere. You might not be able to pull off touchy gourmet plants, but chances are, there's a staple you can grow that will keep you from getting too hungry.

Figure out how to grow with the simplest methods possible. Straight-up double-dug biointensive growing is a good start, as is traditional row gardening. If you plant in wide rows, your water needs go way down. Hugelkultur (or my twist on it, "melon pits") may be another option, as is the Back to Eden method. Once you figure out how to garden traditionally, there's no reason not to fiddle around with more complicated approaches as they tickle your fancy. Redundancy is always a good idea. In my gardening, I maintain a range of different approaches and always plant a variety of staples, from easy roots like turnips to long-term food sources like pecans and other tree crops.

Preparedness should start from the ground up. Get good at doing things simply and you can always add complexity later. Just don't count on those systems to the exclusion of good old-fashioned hard work.

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