

GROW
WHERE YOU'RE
Planted

RECLAIMING EDEN
IN YOUR OWN
BACKYARD

SAMANTHA
Stephenson

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"For my children, the best and most beautiful of the gifts I get to watch grow, and for Our Lady of Mount Carmel, who teaches us to grow in the most beautiful of places — our very souls."

*Outdoors we are confronted everywhere with wonders;
we see that the miraculous is not extraordinary, but the
common mode of existence. It is our daily bread.*

—WENDELL BERRY

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Before Anything Else

*There is a day
when the road neither
comes nor goes, and the way
is not a way but a place.*

—Wendell Berry¹

THE YEAR THAT I PLANTED our first garden, I was a pregnant mom of two toddlers. I could barely bend low enough to tend our two raised beds with a trowel. We watched the garden grow large as I grew round, both of us spilling over to bring forth new life. The littles ones braved the unwieldy jungle to retrieve hidden tomatoes and monster zucchini. Our harvest that spring was so abundant and delightful that no one could have guessed its dark and melancholy origins.

Shortly before our son's first birthday, I found myself taking a pregnancy test. At first, it appeared negative. I set it on the counter to attend to the regular rhythm of chaos that hummed throughout our 1200-square-foot house. Built in 1960, our fixer-upper kept our weekends occupied with home improvement projects, but we adored it for its spacious, tree-lined backyard that made it feel like our own private oasis—a rarity in Southern California suburbia where even small houses loom large on lots the size of a postage stamp. And so, we embraced the pitter-patter of little feet on the laminate flooring that slanted across the uneven foundation, drywall cracking in the corners

¹ Wendell Berry, "1997, VII," in *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979–1997* (Counterpoint, 1998), 216.

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with the contraction and expansion of the California clay. Later that morning, chaos diffused, and I returned to check on the pregnancy test I'd abandoned on the counter. Before I'd even crossed the threshold, its bright pink line jumped out at me from across the bathroom, instantly producing waves of shock and joy in equal measure.

Delighted as we were to be expecting our third baby, I soon found myself unable to access that joy. As if someone had turned off the water to a faucet, my emotions ran dry. I no longer felt delight, anticipation, motivation, or even contented satisfaction. In their place came inexplicable, sourceless darkness and despair. It was all I could do to drag myself through the most basic motions of stay-at-home motherhood. About a year had passed since I'd left my full-time teaching job to stay home with my kids a few months after completing my master's degree in bioethics. I had just begun a writing stint for a publication of which I had all but begged to be a part. Dream after dream was coming true, but now it felt as though someone else had dreamed them. Confused and ashamed, I had to ask my editor for a leave-of-absence. I could no longer put words on the page. It stayed blank, just like my insides.

I now know that this was the first sign of my burgeoning battle with chronic disease. It would be years before I would put it together that my bouts with prenatal depression in this and the following pregnancy, my bone-deep exhaustion, hair loss, difficulty losing weight, and searing joint pain were all connected (more on that in the section on autumn). For many women with autoimmune disorders, their symptoms take a back seat during pregnancy. I don't know if it is me or the Hashimoto's, but my symptoms flare up worse than ever. There is something about growing new life that makes me feel like I am dying. All I knew at the time was that my life—a life that had once been full of joy and possibility—was suddenly bleak and gray. Nothing had changed, but everything was different. That's when I found her.

She was this incredibly vibrant woman, not much older than I, with a few more kids and a velvety smooth voice. I stumbled across her YouTube channel, and immediately I was hooked. Every inch of her was as lovely as the flowers that sprawled across her cottage gardens. I was drawn in by the aesthetic appeal of her videos, but even more enchanted by the beauty of her words and enticed by the lifestyle she espoused. She spun tales about life on the homestead that quickly became my own grown-up fairy tales. From the stunning flowers blooming on the borders of her stone steps to the ripe, juicy tomatoes she sliced on her well-worn wooden cutting board to the luscious grapes hanging heavy from the

vines spilling over her courtyard arbor, I devoured every second. As I binged her videos, I absorbed her philosophy and let it take hold until it became my own. My soul soaked it all in, and, like a dried out old sponge, sprang back into life. By my second trimester, we were building raised garden beds and filling them with compost.

I give thanks for my initial ignorance; if I had known from the beginning what a vast undertaking it is to grow your own food, I am not sure I would have persisted. Years of schooling may have earned me two master's degrees, but I knew next to nothing about how our food is grown or where it comes from. Blissfully ignorant, I plopped down with a couple of classic gardening books and calculated how much space we would need for our small but growing family.

I quickly learned that you cannot, in fact, grow all your own vegetables in two raised garden beds, and that even if you fill your yard with fruit trees, it will be years before you actually taste the fruits of those labors. As we prepared to relocate to Idaho's Snake River Valley, my homestead dreams quickly took a back seat. We packed up boxes. Our fourth baby was born. I published my first book.

Six years later, we find ourselves a thousand miles away—literally and figuratively—from where we were in those early gardening days. We moved to a one-third-acre property in a typical suburban neighborhood that backs up to an irrigation canal that borders the remnants of rural Idaho. My writing desk on the second floor overlooks twenty acres of open field, home to prancing peacocks, millions of chirping crickets, and soaring birds of prey. Our neighbors raise their own cows, horses, and chickens. We may live in suburbia, but if you close your eyes, you'll find yourself immersed in the sounds and scents of the country.

We dove into homeschooling and settled into our new parish community. We built relationships with some of the best neighbors around. We eagerly awaited fruit from the small orchard we'd planted the first year we moved in, and we munched on peas, lettuces, strawberries, tomatoes, cucumbers, and zucchini from the five raised beds we built that first year. The garden was buzzing, but the dream of growing enough food to feed our family was dormant, sealed away in one of our unpacked boxes. Then one day, I stumbled upon it hiding in the weeds behind our fence.

Our home borders one of the many canals in the valley's intricate irrigation system. Our property line runs down its center. Our backyard fence stops quite short of that due to an easement next to the canal that allows for easy access when it needs to be

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serviced. The area between our fence and the canal was a weedy patch of puncture vine, bindweed, and tall grasses. The brush was almost too thick to walk through, but the occasional venturesome dog walker would find his way through.

That day, my heart sank as I discovered the remains of nocturnal teenage revelry in the form of piles of trash littered about our property. I thought back to my days studying Malcom Gladwell's *The Tipping Point*, in which he describes how New York officials cut crime by eliminating signs of disorder, like cleaning up graffiti on the subways. As disappointed as I was, could I really blame those kids for treating our property like a dumpster? It looked utterly abandoned, certainly not as though it mattered to anyone.

As quickly as if I'd dropped a match into those dried up weeds at my feet, the spark of an idea engulfed my consciousness. "What if this space became a garden?" I asked myself. If this were a well-tended place of beauty, not only would our kids' bare feet have fewer wounds from puncture-vine thorns and neighbors receive the signal that this land *belongs* to somebody, but we could also reclaim this soil—*our* soil—as a place of productivity and nourishment for our family. I had lost any illusion that we could grow everything we needed in those two small garden boxes long ago, but continued to pack away my thoughts of *what ifs* and *somedays* tenderly, sealing them in a box marked for a future property on sprawling acreage, a property with towering barns and open fields signaling the potential for self-sufficiency.

But as I surveyed the weedy patch of dirt and plucked trash out of the dust, those dreams burst out of the box where I had sealed them and settled in the soil before me. Words echoed unbidden through my mind. First, the words attributed to St. Teresa of Calcutta: "Grow where you are planted"; followed by those from the Gospel of Luke: "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much" (16:10). From that moment on, those escaped dreams took on the character of a call, a call that rooted itself in our soil, on our land. Those words opened my eyes both to the dignity of our land and to the faithfulness with which I was called to steward it. How could I truly say I dreamed of living off the land when I hadn't yet been faithful to the land beneath my feet?

That day, I got to work. I laid down cardboard and hauled in yards of compost and mulch, employing the "no-dig" approach I'd seen in dozens of gardening videos. The land sloped down from our fence toward the canal. I evened it out by applying thicker layers toward the lower end. Later, I purchased compost and mulch in bulk and shoveled it into our wheelbarrow to apply it to the garden plot. It took me weeks in the whipping

spring wind. When at last I finished and surveyed twelve garden beds of dark earth neatly demarcated by wood chip paths, my husband cheerily observed that they looked like freshly dug graves. In a way, they were. My lofty, starry-eyed homestead dream was dead and buried; my new mission to grow where we are planted was born.

Slowly, I discovered that we could do so much more on our little piece of land than I had realized. Every inch of our property took on a new air of possibility. We devoted a section of our yard to chickens and used their spent bedding for compost and to fertilize the raspberries. That first year, we grew enough onions, potatoes, and squash to last us through the winter. The next year, we added a year's supply of garlic, dried herbs, and herbal teas. I canned jam from our blackberries, and we canned a hundred pounds of peaches from a local orchard. The kids spent their summer stuffing their faces with strawberries, and we welcomed bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds as they hovered above jewel-toned zinnias towering over the children. We have become stewards of abundance — not just of food, but of beauty and joy, simplicity and wonder. Even with all this fruitfulness, we have yet to maximize the harvest potential we have on our one-third-acre suburban property.

With abundance comes work. Gardens need tending, weeding, and a vigilant sentry to keep squash bugs at bay. Simply receiving the bounty requires diligence in cultivating, harvesting, and preserving. Everything from the unpredictability of the weather to unexpected pests guarantee that the gardener bathes daily in the sometimes gentle and sometimes torrential waters of humility. With every seed sown and fruit harvested, I was encountering the Holy Spirit in the gentle breeze of the garden. In the creeping weeds, I saw our need to pull sin out by its roots. Drought spoke to me of meaning in spiritual dryness.

I am hardly the first gardener to be enchanted by God's presence in growing things. Scripture is filled with agricultural metaphors, as are Jesus' parables. As I write to you, it is Holy Week, and I am reminded that some of the most significant moments of Jesus' life — and the Father's plan for our salvation — took place in gardens: the agony in the garden of Good Friday, and the Resurrection of Easter Sunday. If we look further back, we recall that God's gift of original holiness was set in a garden. It was there that we fell by Adam's "happy fault," catapulting us into the greatest story of love and redemption that will ever be. We may not all be called to off-grid homesteading or large-scale market farming, but we are all made for the Garden.

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I want to take you on a comprehensive, seasonally oriented journey to growing food for your family. Whether you are a seasoned grower or just beginning to garden, these pages will offer you practical tips and how-tos for growing your own food as well as spiritual nourishment for your inner garden. The book is organized by season so that you will know which tasks need to be done during each part of the year and have all those instructions in one convenient location. The wisdom of monastic life shows that we need both prayer and work, *ora et labora*. To that end, each section includes a seasonal theme and “seeds for contemplation” to set a prayerful tone for the work of the season. Take note of the tidbits for raising little gardeners in the sidebars. There is no need to try every suggestion; these are meant to encourage and inspire you, not pile on to your to-do list. Interspersed throughout, you will find suggestions for tools or materials you may need for daily chores or one-time tasks. I have tried to indicate where it is prudent to invest, what might be more of a splurge if you have the funds, as well as tips and tricks for doing it on a dime if you need to stick to a tight budget. You can find a full list of these recommendations at www.snstephenson.com/grow. You can also download printable versions of the resources listed in the appendix, including a month-by-month garden chore checklist, a list of my favorite resources for diving deeper, and seasonal menu suggestions with some of our family’s favorite recipes to maximize your enjoyment of your garden harvest! You will also find a download not contained in this book: a year-long guide that expands the “little hands” activities in this book into a literature-based elementary science curriculum for homeschool families, a perfect blend of hands-on gardening and baking, cozy reading, and fantastic field trips to make learning come alive.

This journey to increase our self-sufficiency has given our family a vision not born of fear or scarcity but rooted in the call to joyful stewardship. What began as a response to chronic illness grew into a celebration of abundance—a way of life that nurtures the body and soul alike. Rather than retreating into rugged individualism, this lifestyle is an invitation into deeper interconnectedness: with creation, with each other, and most of all with Christ. It is a Christ-rooted, family-centered, seasonally oriented approach to living—one that honors both the limits and the gifts of our days. I hope and pray that this book nourishes both you and your garden, helping you to deepen your roots and bear good fruit, and always, to grow where you are planted!

Grow Where You're Planted





SPRING

SOWING SEEDS AND NEW LIFE

*Neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything,
but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants
and the one who waters have a common purpose. . . . For we
are God's servants, working together; you are God's field.*

—1 Corinthians 3:7–9





Welcome to Spring

PLANNER THAT I AM, I have always found the fluctuating date of Easter flabbergasting. How is it that a date so important is not fixed, but subject to the inconstant moon? Have we not had the time these last centuries to really nail it down?

And yet, as I reflect on it, the timing of Easter as the season of new life couldn't be more fitting. Spring, too, is fickle in its appearance. Though we can be assured that the days will lengthen and the soil will warm, the exact conditions of their dependable return remain mysterious until their final unfolding.

It's fitting, really, that in this season, new life comes again — as it never has before. Trees leaf out, bulbs bloom, fruit trees flower, tiny beaks peck their way out of cracking shells, and sprigs of green begin to peek through the soil. All of this is routine, but the exact revelation of it all, the dance of new life unfurling, is its own show every year. So much of what we do in the garden and *when* we do it depends on an intricate interplay of variables like soil and air temperatures, cold snaps and frosts, heat waves or heavy spring storms. As gardeners, we wait on the weather as we ought, as Christ's disciples, to be waiting on the Lord.



Seeds for Contemplation in Spring

BECOMING GOOD SOIL

ANY CHRISTIAN BOOK ON SOIL and soul would, sooner or later, have to find its way to the parable of the sower. In our urbanized and ostensibly Christianized sower nation, it is possible that this parable is more familiar to us than is the act of sowing seeds in the first place. Still, its words, like all the Word, merit meditation:

When a great crowd gathered and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable: “A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture. Some fell among thorns,

and the thorns grew with it and choked it. Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold.” As he said this, he called out, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” (Luke 8:4–8)

The message of the parable seems simple enough: we must become good soil. But as any gardener who has tried to grow simply by tossing seed out onto any old patch of ground can tell you, *good* soil is hard to come by. Jesus and His agrarian audience knew this intimately, even before the degradation of modern industrialized farming. Still, the passage bears reimagining in our contemporary context to see what we might be able to glean from this timeless treasure.

ON THE PATH

In *Meditations on the Parables of Jesus*, Cistercian monk Thomas Keating equates the hard path

in this parable with the concrete of urban sidewalks: “There is no chance of this seed bearing

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fruit because it can't get through the concrete ... the worldviews with which people live with unquestioning presuppositions."² He goes on to imagine the seeds that fall through the cracks of the sidewalk as a victory for the kingdom of God, explaining that the upsetting of our preconceived ideas is a necessity to receive the Word of God.

In the garden, such concrete hardness translates to compacted soil. The housing development where we live, as with most Idaho suburbs, used to be conventionally farmed agricultural land. This is land that is tilled year after year, destroying soil biology, hampering its ability to hold moisture. Over the decades, much of America's topsoil has been lost to dust, and what's left has compacted under the weight of the heavy machinery used in industrial farming. Soil compaction can increase by the simple *walking* of the gardener along paths that surround in-ground beds. If the daily tread of a single human walking on the soil surface contributes to compaction, how much more does a fully loaded grain cart, for example, weighing twenty to forty *tons*?³ Suffice it say that soil compaction has been a significant hurdle to production in our garden.

If Keating is right, the compaction of our hearts forms a solid barrier to the Lord's Word. Not only does this barrier prevent His truth from

penetrating, it erodes over time, leaving us less able to absorb truth when we encounter it. If we want to change this, if we want to transform our hearts into the good soil where the Lord's Word can take root, we need to be willing to investigate new ideas that might clash with our existing preconceptions. Any image we hold of God will be insufficient to capture His fullness; can we allow our existing images to be challenged by Scripture and Church teaching that might lead us to deeper intimacy with God as He actually is?

My two-year-old is passing through a phase where she is deeply troubled when I put my hair up. "Hair down!" she yells, insisting that I take the form that makes her most comfortable with me. She doesn't know me with my hair up. The difference in form makes her anxious and worried. How many of us insulate the depths of our compacted hearts, afraid to look at God with His hair down?

When we insist that God conform to our preexisting image of Him, this rigid barrier reveals to us that we want a statue, not a living person. To the extent that we refuse to allow God's continual self-disclosure in our lives by clinging to one static, unchanging notion, we worship an idol.

We have been revitalizing the soil here on our property over the last four years, reintroducing

² Thomas Keating, *Meditations on the Parables of Jesus* (Continuum, 2001), 65.

³ Jodi DeJong-Hughes, "Soil Compaction," University of Minnesota Extension, reviewed 2018, <https://extension.umn.edu/soil-management-and-health/soil-compaction>.

nutrients to feed soil life and growing cover crops with deep roots to combat the compaction. It has been slow work, but after four seasons, I have finally begun to encounter earthworms in this section of the garden. Life is returning to our soil. If we likewise wish for the Lord's Word

to penetrate deeply into our hardened hearts, we must be willing to open them to whatever we find there. It may be challenging, but what could be more worthwhile than allowing the God of the universe to transform our stagnant perceptions and breathe life into us once more?



FOR THE BIRDS

After addressing the state of our soil, Jesus next speaks to us of the critters that trample the seeds and the birds that gobble them all up. These are the exterior voices and influences that deny the Word, riddle us with doubt, and rob us of the Lord's perfect peace. If we submit our time to a humble examination of conscience, who will we find ourselves listening to? To which voices do we give the greatest credence? In the homesteading community, there is a great emphasis on preparedness and self-sufficiency. These are worthwhile goals and by no means problematic in themselves, but many voices in this arena threaten to snatch away our peace when we put greater stock in them than we do trust in the Lord.

This is the first temptation Jesus faced in the desert: the temptation to security. When the devil comes to Jesus in His hunger and taunts

Him to turn stones into bread, Jesus responds, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4). As Christ's disciples, we live by His example and steep ourselves in Scripture, turning deaf ears to voices that tell lies, stir up division, and promote a spirit of fear. As 2 Timothy 1:7 reminds us, "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." In the garden, we hear many voices telling us the "right way" to do every little task. Fear can paralyze us, stealing our joy and shutting us down. Being open to learning new things and patient when things don't go as expected allows God's refreshing grace to penetrate our souls, rooting us more deeply in His truth—not as we'd like it to be, but as it actually is.



ON ROCKY GROUND

Am I alone as a gardener who has—on more than one occasion—neglected a plant brought

from a nursery only to find it withered up a few days later? The parable tells us that the seed that

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fell on rocky ground withered up for lack of moisture.

Thirst is one of Scripture's most oft-repeated spiritual metaphors. Thirst reminds us of our deep need and longing for our Creator. Without water, we cannot live. Without God, we perish spiritually. What then, are these treacherous rocks that cause us to wither for lack of water?

Water is to the body as prayer is to the soul, and the precondition of prayer is silence. If we cannot quiet our minds, we cannot listen attentively to our Maker. If we understand the rocks in our soil to be the noise in our souls, we see that our collective soil is indisputably the rockiest ground in human history. The remedy here is slightly different than closing our ears to

the squawking of the alarmist birds in our lives. The stones we carry are our own habits, weighing us down with their perpetual presence.

The distractions in our lives need not be overtly sinful; even spiritual aids like books, podcasts, and religious events can become impediments to growth if they begin to occupy so much space in our lives that the seeds the Lord is sowing cannot take root. As John Ortberg cautions, "If the devil can't make you sin, he'll make you busy, because either way your soul will shrivel."⁴ If we want our lives to become the flourishing garden God intends, we must be willing to remove even the loveliest glittering gemstone from the soil of our souls to make space for the humble seeds God sows at every moment.



AMONG THE THORNS

The final impediment to becoming good soil is the thorny weeds that choke out the seedlings, preventing their growth. For example, bellbind (or bindweed, as some call it), has deceptively lovely white flowers and heart-shaped leaves in rich hues of green. Its delicate tendrils wind themselves around crops, making it difficult to pull up the weeds without damaging roots of precious produce. Left to its own devices,

bellbind will creep its way across garden plots and, as the parable tells us, choke out the entire garden. In large-scale production, field bindweed has been shown to reduce crop yields by as much as 50 percent!⁵

This is what sin does in our lives. It creeps over us, winding its way around, and chokes the life out of us. It covers us with deceptively delicate greenery and lovely blooms, enticing

⁴ John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping: Caring for the Most Important Part of You* (Zondervan, 2014), 59.

⁵ Susan Marquesan, "The Noxious, Persistent, Invasive, and Perennial Bindweeds," Penn State Extension, updated April 30, 2025, <https://extension.psu.edu/the-noxious-persistent-invasive-and-perennial-bindweeds>.

promises that ultimately offer nothing but the seeds of further ensnarement. This is why I named the demonic tempter in my last book “Bellbind.”⁶ Nothing but the regular cultivation of our souls and a dose of the Good Gardener’s grace can save us. If I leave my garden unattended for a week, I return to several hours’ worth of weeding. A daily examination of conscience helps us to extract the vices when they are small, before their deep taproots or runners establish control over us. Regular Reconciliation ensures that we weed out the worst within us.

Bellbind, with its intricate web of roots that buries itself up to thirty feet in the soil and seeds that remain viable for decades, shows us a deeper truth.⁷ Even when we do our best to eradicate sin and vice, concupiscence lurks beneath the soil. Try as we might, we will never have a weed-free garden this side of Heaven. Of course, some techniques are more effective than others. With continual removal via hand-weeding, we can weaken the tendencies to sin within us. We can plant a robust garden of virtues, allowing the foliage of good works and charity to bloom

open, shading out the dark impulses and starving them of the light they need to grow.

There is one sure way to kill bindweed, but it is anathema to organic, regenerative gardening advocates like me. It is called glyphosate, and I would have named my demon after that instead, had it any poetic ring to it. This herbicide represents the classic “cure worse than the disease” dilemma. Just a touch of this to the leaves, and the poison will effectively travel through the whole system of the plant, destroying its roots and all—and any other growing things that happen to live nearby. Glyphosate is a slow-acting toxin that depletes our soil, disrupts our microbiome, causes cancer, and devastates ecosystems⁸—yet it remains a cornerstone of industrial agriculture as well as suburban lawn culture. It goes by the brand name Roundup.

This poison is one of the reasons I began gardening in the first place, though I didn’t know it by name at the time. Now that my research has shown me the extent to which it is responsible for so many debilitating chronic diseases and even cancers, I am deeply suspicious of its continued use on our farms. Still, for farmers facing

⁶ In my book *The Bellbind Letters: Inside the Devil’s Plan for Your Motherhood*, a creative take on C. S. Lewis’s *The Screwtape Letters*, a senior demon advises a junior tempter as to how best to ensnare his “patient” in temptation and misery. I named the tempter “Bellbind” after battling the vigorous weed, season after season, in my garden.

⁷ Washington State University, “*Field Bindweed Wheat & Small Grains Washington State University*,” accessed July 24, 2025, smallgrains.wsu.edu/weed-resources/common-weed-list/field-bindweed.

⁸ *Into the Weeds: Dewayne “Lee” Johnson vs. Monsanto Company*, directed by Jennifer Baichwal (Mercury Films, 2022), documentary film.

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a daily battle against a seemingly indestructible foe, the temptation to chemically stamp it out is irresistible. After all, if I could stamp out my sin in one fell swoop, I would do it. Wouldn't I?

And what is the equivalent of Roundup in the spiritual life? Some would say a toxic form of pride called *scruples*. These are poisons we willingly consume to eliminate any evidence of sin in our souls, killing everything in their path and stamping out joy along with our vices. Even little scruples make us willing to sacrifice the vitality of our soul to achieve the barren illusion of perfection. It may kill vice, but it stifles within us every form of life, so that not even the seeds of the Good Gardener can sprout. Better

to live with a few weeds and let grace grow wild than to sterilize the soil of our souls in pursuit of flawlessness.

That doesn't mean we cede the garden entirely. What it does mean is continually entrusting ourselves to the Master Gardener. If He accepts us patiently as we are, knowing full well the work of weeding and pruning we require, who are we to deny Him? It is not for us to cower in shame—a posture that betrays our own mercilessness towards ourselves, our lack of confidence in His mercy. Instead, we should fling ourselves into His arms with joyful anticipation of the beauty that will bloom when we surrender ourselves to His refinement.



PATIENT TRUST

Waiting for seeds to sprout should be an occasion of joyful hope, yet it always fills me with uneasy anxiety. In my defense, I have been burned by bad seeds. I once bought some older seeds on sale—50 percent off!—thinking that, although I'd likely experience lower germination, I would certainly get enough seeds sprouted to make the savings worth my while. I waited one week, then two. Before I knew it, I'd lost a month of growing time with nothing to show for it. These days, I wait on pins and needles, barely registering a quiet sense of dread in my stomach until it flees in the face of the exuberance that overtakes me at the first sight of green. It happens every time:

tomatoes, peppers, zinnias, corn. A single bad experience, and all my expectations are colored over with dread.

In times that call for waiting, my four-year-old routinely recites the definition of patience from his preschool character training book: "Patience is 'waiting with a happy heart,'" he reminds us both. And I do try—yet my attitude often errs on the side of aggravated rather than happy. It's given me time to reflect that it might be more accurate to say "hopeful," but even hope can take on an anxious tone, and patience connotes the absence of anxiety.

Seeds for Contemplation in Spring

The real key to unlocking patience is trust. Surrendering to the Lord and His ways is a release of control, an act of trust that frees us to wait patiently. Teilhard de Chardin captures this in his prayer “Patient Trust”:

Above all, trust in the slow work of God. We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. We should like to skip the intermediate stages. We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new.

And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability—and that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you; your ideas mature gradually—let them grow, let them shape themselves, without undue haste. Don’t try to force them on, as

though you could be today what time (that is to say, grace and circumstances acting on your own good will) will make of you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new spirit gradually forming within you will be. Give Our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you, and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.⁹

So much of the gardener’s work is done in that quiet, trembling tension between trust and uncertainty. To wait in faith—knowing the fruit may never appear in our season or in our sight—is to entrust the harvest not to our own hands, but to the mercy of God. This is the hidden labor of the kingdom: sowing in hope, surrendering the harvest.

⁹ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “Patient Trust,” in *Hearts on Fire: Praying with Jesuits*, ed. Michael Harter (Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1993), 102–103.





Tending the Garden in Spring

IT STARTS WITH SOIL

THE POWER OF THE PARABLE of the sower is the simple truth it's rooted in: if you want your garden to be fruitful, it all starts with good soil. We will walk through garden design in a moment, but first, here are a few considerations when selecting the soil for your garden.

You may choose to work with your native soil. This is free, but you may face problems of compaction (for in-ground garden beds), lack of nutrients, and a robust bank of weed seeds. Buying soil from nurseries for bulk delivery does not necessarily solve this problem, as it is not well regulated and can be high in salts or phosphorus from animal manures, inadvertently contaminated by “forever chemicals,” or simply just as low in nutrients as your native soil—with a higher price tag. The best bang for your buck is probably growing in your native soil and enriching it with a high-quality organic compost. This

can be hard to find. Making your own is likely the way to achieve the best quality, but that takes time and space.

Connect with your local organic nursery. They may be willing to deliver compost in bulk and can certainly connect you with a trustworthy, local source. Getting compost delivered in bulk requires space (a tarp on your driveway will do), but it will ultimately save you an incredible amount of money compared to the 1.5-cubic-foot bags you can buy at the big-box stores. Still, if you have to rely on the latter, I can recommend the brand Near Source Organics. The most calculated and scientific approach includes collecting samples of your soil in a kit and sending them to a company that will conduct a soil test. You will get a clear picture of the nutrient deficiencies in your growing space and can amend intentionally with bone meal or

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Tip #1: My Little Patch

Give little gardeners their own space to grow in, whether it is a pot on a windowsill or an eight-by-four raised bed. Let them select and plant their own seeds with a little guidance from you on what will grow well in your space and season. Celebrate planting day by reading aloud *We Are the Gardeners* by Joanna Gaines to set the stage for the season to come!

other organic fertilizers to address the specific needs of your garden rather than simply amending with general-purpose fertilizers.



DESIGNING YOUR GARDEN

The first decisions you will need to make in regard to your garden are where to put it and what type of growing you would like to do. In some cases, these decisions will be made for you. If you are growing within a limited space or a very tight budget, these limits will narrow your options. Regard these limitations as a gift; a wider variety of options makes decision-making more difficult and second-guessing inevitable.

I have yet to conduct a soil test on our Idaho garden. In the future, I hope to implement this every other season. I hope that encourages you as we go through the steps in this book. You do not need to learn everything all at once! Implement the baby steps that feel manageable to you and learn as you go. Even seasoned farmers face new challenges from year to year with the changes of seasons, climate, weather, pest pressure, and so on. You *will* make mistakes. Take comfort in knowing that every mistake is an opportunity to learn and grow better in the future.

In the “Autumn” section, we will cover in detail how to grow cover crops or mulch properly over winter to increase your soil fertility annually year after year. If you are picking this book up in late summer, fall, or even early winter, I encourage you to skip ahead a bit and take a peek at what you can be doing *now* to prepare your garden beds for next spring!

If you have only a small patch of earth or even a tight patio corner, there are options that maximize your growing space. For example, a planter such as the Greenstalk vertical planter from Epic Gardening contains thirty planting pockets within a footprint of only nineteen inches! If I were still in our first apartment, I would absolutely invest in one of these (or something similar) to grow fresh greens, herbs,

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Tip #2: Make It Official

Give each child a title to go with their garden chores. Thinking of themselves as the “egg collector” or “weed extractor” or “plant waterer” helps them take ownership over their new responsibility. Always remember to “inspect what you expect” and be patient as you gently correct or remind them how to do each job properly.

strawberries, tomatoes, root veggies, and more on our tiny patio. It’s a simple, satisfying way to stretch your grocery budget and enjoy home-grown food, even without a big backyard.

If you do have some space to dedicate to your garden, you need to do a bit more planning. Here are some easy steps to get you started.

Select a location. Take some time to observe the sunlight as it moves over your property throughout the day in one of the warmer seasons (this will shift slightly over the seasons, and the degree of this shift will vary based on your proximity to the equator). Ideally, you will grow your

veggies in a location that gets six or more hours of sunlight during the day. More is better, as most veggies love full sun. You can always add a shade cloth to protect the garden from severe heat during 100-plus degree days if your climate reaches those temps. Is your space a bit shady? Crops that do well with a bit of shade include lettuces and other greens like spinach; herbs like chives, parsley, and cilantro; and root veggies like beets and carrots.

Select a method. Once you’ve got your location selected, it is time to decide between the three main methods of growing for home gardeners: tillage, no-dig, and raised beds. We have started gardens on our property using all of these methods, and I will share with you the pros and cons of each. In general, there is a trade-off between time and money, and whichever you have more of will determine which option works best for your family.

Tilling, or digging up the first few inches of topsoil, is the traditional method of in-ground garden beds, but advocates of regenerative gardening tend to discourage tilling as it disrupts soil life and can lead to erosion. Digging by hand is the cheapest option if you are willing to put in the manpower. You can also buy or rent a tiller if you plan to till every season. If a regenerative approach appeals to

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you, consider a one-time till to eliminate grass or break up soil compaction when you first begin your garden, and then implement no-till methods in the years to come. If I were to start an in-ground garden from scratch tomorrow, this is the method I would use.

The no-dig method is another popular option for starting an in-ground garden. This involves putting down a layer of plain cardboard (no tape or fancy painted designs), and covering with a six-inch layer of compost for the garden beds and mulch for the paths. This avoids tillage and can be laid directly over grass as it will die and break down to feed the soil when deprived of light. Some argue that this method also deprives the soil life of nutrients and water, and people are becoming increasingly concerned about the potentially unknown toxic ingredients in today's cardboard. If you are gardening for the organic aspect of homegrown produce, you might want to steer clear of cardboard. You can opt for organic weed paper instead; is more expensive and less effective than cardboard, but safer for those concerned about toxic load.

We used the no-dig method a few places on the property, and it helped with weed control for a few seasons, but weed pressure did return once the cardboard

broke down. Another downside of this option is the labor and cost. Shoveling compost and mulch is perhaps even more physically demanding than tilling, and you will need quite a lot of compost for a six-inch layer. The best mulch is arborist mulch from freshly cut trees. You can connect with a local arborist, sign up for a free bulk delivery of mulch at getchipdrop.com, or cut and chip your own if you have many trees on your property! The no-dig method remains a popular option and is worth considering.



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Tip #3: Butterflies in the Backyard

Spring is the perfect time to raise butterflies and observe the miraculous cycle of life right up close. You can purchase a butterfly habitat and send away for caterpillars (they usually come with a certificate of some sort for ordering fresh wrigglers), check your local greenhouse to source them locally, or even plant your own milkweed in the backyard and check for eggs. Younger kiddos will enjoy Eric Carle's classic *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, while school-aged kids will be ready for *Monarch Butterfly* by Gail Gibbons.



Finally, *raised-bed gardening* is the priciest option. However, this method also has several advantages that are worth considering. A raised bed is any type of container that sits above the soil, allowing you to fill in its walls with a blend of soil and compost. This allows you to avoid—or at least lessen—weed pressure, avoid soil compaction, and carefully curate soil nutrients. If you live in an area with pests like voles which dig and destroy gardens from beneath, you can install hardware cloth at the base of your

raised bed to create an impenetrable barrier of protection from these destructive mammals. If you are or will soon reach your golden years, or suffer from chronic pain, raised beds are a wonderful way to keep gardening accessible to you. Once the beds are filled with compost, there is no need to bend low for backbreaking weeding and tending. Some options are even high enough that you can plant and weed them while standing up!

As I mentioned, the cost of these benefits can be considerable. You can build DIY beds from lumber, but when we built ours, the cost of lumber was so high that a premade kit was actually more cost-effective and saved us a ton of labor. You can save a bit on the cost of filling the beds by using the *hügelkultur* method: place a mix of branches, wood chip mulch, garden waste, and other materials beneath the soil you fill in on top. These will create volume and break down slowly. You will need to top off your bed with compost in the following years, but this method can cut down on the initial cost. There are also several affordable kit options made of galvanized steel that can be customized in shape and size. The instructions were easy to follow (even for an instruction-illiterate like me). The steel doesn't heat up in the summer, so it is safe for plants and little gardeners alike. I was able to find an eight-by-four bed on Amazon for only thirty dollars at one point, making it the most affordable option

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I could find. I recommend against creating beds wider than four feet, as they become difficult to weed and harvest from when they are wider than an arm's length from each side.

There are pros and cons to each option, and what is best for your family will depend on a personal calculation of the time, labor, and space available to you. If you are growing in a small backyard with a modest budget to invest, I generally recommend investing in raised beds about a foot high. Taller is better if you have physical limitations. This is the option that allows most families with small-scale suburban backyards to ease into gardening and get the most yield out of their space with the least friction. The good news is that *all* the options are *good* options, and you can begin growing food for your family wherever you are planted.

The final hardscaping decision you will need to make regards pathways. You can install living pathways of clover or native grasses. If you are installing raised beds on your lawn, this will be the default. (If you are installing your garden beds directly over grass, be sure to cover it with a thick layer of overlapping cardboard or even solarize by covering it with clear plastic for a few months to kill off grass prior to planting, lest the lawn haunt your garden as your most persistent weed. This was our first set-up in California.)

In our in-ground garden, we install a thick layer of arborist wood chip mulch each season (*not* the kind in bags at the big-box stores). This helps define the pathways and keeps weeds to a minimum. You can also install gravel or decomposed granite with or without concrete pavers. You can keep weed pressure to a minimum by treating with organic preemergents like corn





Tip #4: Make a Jubilee

In our home, we take seriously Louisa May Alcott's wisdom in *Little Women*, striving to "make a jubilee out of every little household joy." In the garden, that means celebrating "the firsts" of each season: the first bulb to peek through, the first bloom on the cherry trees, the first peach to fruit up, and the first tree to leaf out. You can keep a calendar and draw a picture of each first and even compare each year's calendar to see how the season unfolds differently, but with similar rhythm.

gluten in early spring and using a flame weeder as seedlings pop up. Gravel or stone walkways are more formal in appearance, whereas wood chips create a more rustic and natural feel. I do not recommend installing weed "fabric" beneath paths as it is a short-term weed suppressant but breaks down into microplastics and becomes ineffective after the first few seasons, nor do I recommend polymeric sand, which is essentially an acrylic glue that goes between pavers. It has to be removed and reinstalled after a few years and adds further microplastic pollution to your soil. Decomposed granite and pea gravel are good organic solutions that can be topped off every few years as they naturally shift and settle. Whichever option you choose will come with some weed pressure and maintenance requirements. Anyone who tells you differently is selling something!

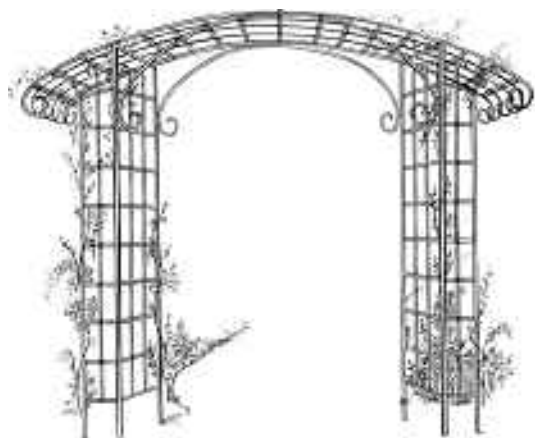
BEFORE YOU START: PLANNING IT ALL OUT

Once you have your garden beds set up, it is time to make plans and select seeds for the season. With some exceptions, most plants fall into two categories. Annuals are plants that die back in winter, while perennials will go dormant during the cooler months, losing leaves but resuming growth in the spring and summer for many years to come. We will plan the annual veggie beds in a moment, but first let's discuss some other options to take advantage of the space you have. Planting a backyard orchard or berry patch or

installing other perennial plants alongside fences are great ways to make your space work for you. Fruit trees and perennials, like berry bushes, grape vines, and even asparagus, are plants that return every year and live for many years. They require some work up front, annual fertilization and pruning, and lots of patience, but eventually they will bear a lovely crop of fruit without needing to be replanted each year like your veggie garden.

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We have six fruit trees tucked away into one corner of our lawn. We grew most of them from bare root plants (those should be planted during the dormancy of early spring) and a couple from pots as we found we were willing to pay more to shorten our wait for fruit. We have a few blueberry, blackberry, and raspberry bushes along our fence and one entire raised bed dedicated to strawberries. Other perennial veggies we've considered putting in on our remaining fence line are asparagus and artichokes. We intentionally selected varieties of our trees and berries so that something will be fruiting all summer long. This staggered harvest also helps to keep preserving manageable (if the kids don't gobble it all up outside!). We just added an arched trellis flanked by grape vines, and although we won't reap that harvest for a few years, we are delighted to watch in wonder as it climbs a bit farther each season.



We also tend an herbal tea and flower bed with a mix of annuals and perennials for herbal tea and medicinal purposes. I reseed calendula annually. It is wonderful for making infused oils and skin salves or for drying to pop into chicken soup. It is nicknamed the “pot marigold” because the mothers of old used to include it in broths for its healing properties. We also have chamomile and peppermint for dried herbal teas. (Plant mint in a pot underground to keep it from monopolizing your garden, or plant it as ground cover; it spreads viciously!) Other perennials like rosemary, sage, oregano, dill, and thyme can be dried and used for cooking and medicinal purposes. Dill is the secret ingredient in “Jewish penicillin” (aka chicken soup), and oregano has been shown to be an effective antimicrobial, so toss



those into your soup pot as well. Many of these herbs make lovely edible groundcovers and hedges; in fact, Disneyland's Tomorrowland is landscaped entirely with edible plants! Herbs and flowers are valuable to grow. Aside from the beauty they add to your plot, they attract pollinators and other beneficial insects as well as providing medicinal benefits for your health and fuller favor to your recipes.

Know Your Growing Zone. Before selecting seeds and nailing down a planting date, you will need to know your growing zone. These are classified by your first and last frost dates, giving you an indication of how many warm days you have during the growing season. If you are in a very warm climate, like Hawaii, Southern California, or the South, your growing zone will be higher and your season will be longer (if not perpetual), allowing you to worry less about having enough days to grow produce that needs a lot of time—but probably more about pests and humidity-induced fungal diseases. In exceptionally hot climates, you might find that your best growing season is winter, while growth pauses more in the heat of the summer. If you are growing in a northern climate or one with harsh winters, your growing season will be short, potentially shorter than what most veggies you desire to grow will need. If this is the case, you will need to rely on starting your seeds indoors or in a greenhouse and investigating options like cold



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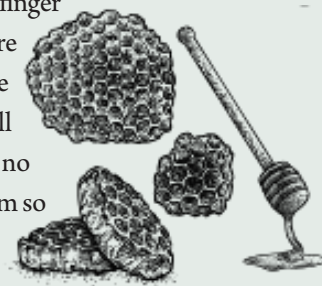


Tip #5: A Taste of Heaven

Spring is a fabulous time to visit a local apiary and see the bees at work. You can taste the difference in honeys coming from local wildflowers versus other types of plants (and as an added bonus, a daily dose of these local honeys keeps seasonal allergies at bay!).

If you're feeling especially bold and you have the space, go ahead and start your own hive. Beekeeping is a simple, lovely way to stay in touch with the seasons, and your garden will thrive in the presence of these little pollinators! Charlotte Milner's *The Bee Book* is an excellent, kid-friendly overview of the importance of bees, how they help the garden, and how they make honey!

If you can't keep bees or make a field trip to see them, research which plants flower earliest in your area so you have something to offer the bees as they first begin venturing out of the hive as the weather warms up. You can even put a dollop of honey on your finger (or on a spoon or plate if you're feeling timid!), and watch the bees eagerly clean it up—they'll consume every drop, leaving no trace behind! Just be still and calm so you don't startle them.



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frames and hoop houses to extend your growing season. A full month-by-month list of essential tasks is available for download at www.snstephenson.com/grow.

Choose What to Grow. Now that you have a sense of your zone and have learned the difference between annuals and perennials, it is time to decide when to plant. In addition to your frost-free growing season (those warm and sunny summer days), you can also plan to extend your growing season by planting frost-tolerant veggies like hardy greens and brassicas in the “shoulder seasons” of fall and early spring to maximize your harvest (more about this in the “Autumn” section). Succession planting can also extend your harvest: consider starting small batches of seeds indoors every couple of weeks to keep a steady supply of fresh greens. Choosing what to grow depends on your goals and your available space. What does your family already enjoy eating? It is delightful to taste homegrown produce bursting with flavor. Tomatoes (and all produce) come in a zillion varieties not found in grocery stores, and even homegrown versions of run-of-the-mill grocery store varieties are delicious enough to ruin you for store-bought versions for life!

One option is to narrow it down to a few crops that you become a true expert in growing by tending them attentively season after season. This approach allows you to master a narrow range before expanding your efforts but

can lead to a great deal of heartbreak if disease or pests take down your entire crop (which is a garden inevitability at least some of the time). Alternatively, you might grow a large variety of items and experiment with what grows well in your climate and soil. Okra, which did fabulously for us in Southern California, isn't a fan of our cooler Idaho spring weather and must be planted at the height of summer here. It can also be fun to experiment with things your family doesn't currently consume, and growing them at home is a great incentive for picky eaters to taste new things. We have grown turnips, parsnips, and lemon cucumbers in the past, and this year we are planting rutabagas, collard greens, and cucamelons—cucumbers that resemble tiny watermelons.

I caution against growing things you already know your family doesn't care for. You might be tempted to think that because it is the garden, you will be more motivated to eat it, but this philosophy has not led to us eating any more kale. Now, instead of wasting valuable garden space, I only plant one kale for the occasional handful tossed into soup and call it a day.

For fresh eating and canning, I recommend putting in raspberry, blackberry, or blueberry bushes for jam. Tomatoes are also an excellent choice for both fresh eating and canning, and if you add some cilantro, tomatillos, and serrano or jalapeño peppers, you have a family salsa garden! Mix and match to create any flavor salsa



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Tip #6: Snap Those Peas

Be sure to plant sugar snap peas for a delicious treat that kids can munch straight from the garden early in the season. These are great crops for small spaces, as they grow well vertically and put on a continual harvest. Be sure to provide a stake or trellis for support. You can even make a day of painting your stakes to add a personal touch to the garden!



you like for fresh eating or freezing; stick to tried-and-true recipes for safety if canning. In warmer climates, avocado trees are high producers that will give your family lots of good healthy fats, calories, and flavor. If you have mild winters, there are some cold-tolerant varieties, or you could consider growing a smaller tree in a pot that you bring inside for the winter.

If you have a bit of space and want to focus on lowering the grocery bill, I recommend crops like garlic, onions, potatoes, sweet potatoes, and winter squashes. These are easy to grow and simple to cure for long-term storage, and they will maximize calories and flavor for your family well beyond the growing season. A full planting

guide for each crop is available in appendix C, and a printable version is available for download at www.snstephenson.com/grow.

Trellising. You can maximize growing space by using trellises to plant vertically. Vining plants like peas, cucumbers, and pole beans love to climb, and you can train other vining plants like melons and squashes onto a trellis if you provide adequate support for the heavy fruits as they develop so they do not detach prematurely and fall due to their weight. Panty hose and old mandarin orange bags make great repurposed supports—just slip them around the melon and tie to the trellis! One thing to consider when using a trellis is that as plants climb higher, they will shade anything that is directly to the north. You can use this to your advantage if you want to keep cool weather plants like cilantro, lettuce, and arugula from bolting during hot summer months, or avoid the shade issue by fixing the

trellis to the northern end of your beds. Resist the urge to fret about it too much; so long as your beds receive



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at least six hours of full sunlight, your garden should grow just fine. In our backyard, our raised beds are directly to the west of our fence, so we attached trellises to the northern end of the beds, but to the side that runs parallel to the fence as that area is already partially shaded by the fence as the sun rises during the early morning hours of the day.

Plant Spacing. Deciding where to place each plant can be as simple or complex as you'd like it to be. Each packet of seeds will indicate the recommended spacing for that plant. This ensures that each plant has enough space to grow to its full size and maximize air flow to avoid fungal issues—and that its roots won't be competing for water or nutrients. However, planting more densely has its benefits, too. The better your soil is covered, the less weed pressure you will need to deal with. You also might be able to maximize your total harvest in a small space by planting more densely; you won't produce the largest squash, but you will harvest more of them, yielding a greater total amount of food for your family overall. I recommend experimenting with spacing in your beds to plant as densely as possible while avoiding fungal diseases that result from lack of airflow (this is especially problematic in more humid growing zones).

Companion Planting. Interplanting different types of flowers and herbs may deter pests, and certain plants—called “companion plants”—actually enhance one another. For example, tomatoes will thrive when planted near basil, carrots, and the edible, blue-flowered herb borage. (Try it! The tiny blue flowers make a lovely salad topping and taste like cucumbers. The bees adore them, and they will reseed themselves prolifically, meaning you only need to plant them once to enjoy them in the garden every season.) Other beneficial flowers to scatter about your garden beds include tiny white sweet alyssum (they smell divine), edible nasturtium (these are especially good at deterring squash bugs), and French marigolds, which are edible, produce easy to collect seeds for replanting, and even release chemicals into the soil that deter pests.¹⁰ If you are curious about diving into companion planting and creative spacing, I recommend the books *Carrots Love Tomatoes* and *Square Foot Gardening* (a full list of my recommendations for diving deeper can be found in appendix E).

¹⁰ Takahiro Hamaguchi, Kazuki Sato, Cláudia S. L. Vicente, and Koichi Hasegawa, “Nematicidal Actions of the Marigold Exudate-Terthienyl: Oxidative Stress-Inducing Compound Penetrates Nematode Hypodermis,” *Biology Open* 8, no. 4 (March 29, 2019): bio038646, <https://doi.org/10.1242/bio.038646>.