

## 6 Ways to Practice Frugal Gardening

I've heard the term "frugal gardening" tossed around throughout my gardening career, but these days it seems less like a buzzword and more like a practical way to garden—focused on spending wisely, avoiding unnecessary purchases, and building long-term sustainability.

Here are a few effective ways I've found to practice frugal gardening:

### 1. Tools

Don't splurge on unnecessary tools. My top garden tool is my hands (and a good pair of gloves), but I also rely on a durable trowel and hand pruner. Since my mom was an avid gardener, I was fortunate to inherit a few of her tools, including a garden hoe, spade, metal tine rake, and fan rake.

Don't get me wrong—I've fallen prey to a few "must-have" garden purchases that didn't work out and now just take up space in the garage. Try to avoid gimmicks but do invest in high-quality tools that you'll actually use and that will get the job done.

### 2. Plants

Start your own plants. When I first began growing vegetable seeds indoors, I kept it simple: a window, a few small pots, aluminum foil under the pots to catch water, and a desk lamp for supplemental light. I did invest in a good seed-starting mix, but overall, it didn't cost much—and my plants grew just fine.

If starting seeds indoors isn't for you, the good news is that many people who do often end up with extras to share. Keep an ear out for anyone giving away seedlings. To learn more about starting seeds indoors, check out the UW–Madison Extension article on [Seed Starting](#).

Also, watch for seed swaps, which tend to pop up this time of year. These events often include tool or plant swaps, and in many cases, you don't need to bring anything to participate. If you do pick up garden plants from a swap, be mindful that they can sometimes carry unwanted weed seeds, insects, or even jumping worm eggs or larvae. You can learn more about [jumping worms](#) through the Wisconsin DNR.

Another way to save money is to buy small plants—they'll grow quickly and fill in garden or container spaces. If you already have perennials, check whether any need dividing, which is a great way to multiply what you already have. For more on this, see "[How and when to divide perennials](#)" from the University of Minnesota Extension.

### 3. Right Plant, Right Place

Follow the adage Master Gardeners often share: "right plant, right place." Choosing plants that match your site conditions can help you avoid problems down the road—and save money in the process.

When adding new plants to your garden, consider perennials. Investing in plants that return year after year reduces the need to repurchase annually. Incorporating native plants is another smart choice, as they are well adapted to local soil and climate conditions. They also support biodiversity and pollinators while requiring less maintenance once established.

Before planting, consider getting a soil test—especially if you haven't done one before or it's been a while. Understanding your soil is the foundation of a healthy, sustainable garden. To learn more, visit the [UW Soil and Forage Lab](#).

#### 4. Do it yourself compost

Start a compost pile. This not only helps reduce kitchen and yard waste headed to the landfill but also creates nutrient-rich soil for your garden.

In the same vein, compost can be used as mulch, along with fallen leaves and untreated grass clippings—all for free. Mulch helps retain soil moisture, reducing the need for watering, and it also suppresses weeds, cutting down on garden maintenance.

For more information on composting, see UW–Madison Extension's [Making and Using Compost in the Garden](#).

#### 5. Repurpose Items

Use household items that can be upcycled into garden features like trellises or containers. Old ladders, chairs, window frames, and even sticks found in the yard can be transformed into fun, unique trellises. Growing crops vertically is a great way to maximize space in a small garden and reduce the need for bending.

There are endless creative options for plant containers. Just make sure anything you use is clean, safe (especially for edibles), and has proper drainage holes. If you're adding hardscaping elements, consider reclaiming materials like bricks or wood scraps.

#### 6. Shop the Sales

For perennials, shrubs, and trees, consider buying in late summer or fall, when nurseries and big-box stores often discount their stock. End-of-season sales are also a great time to purchase supplies such as seed-starting kits, potting mix, tools, gloves, containers, and even raised bed kits.

Start small, stay open to new ideas, look for bargains and opportunities to share, and enjoy watching your garden grow.