

BEGINNERS GUIDE TO

GROWING YOUR OWN FOOD



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**SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT
GOALS**



INTRODUCTION TO LEAF AND GIY

WHAT IS THE LEAF PROGRAMME?

The Literacy & Food Education (LEAF) programme supports community groups in starting or expanding food-growing initiatives in shared spaces such as housing estates, GAA clubs, and Men's Sheds. The programme establishes 25 libraries across the Southeast as food growing learning hubs providing resources, guidance, and support to empower individuals and communities to grow food as a form of climate action. LEAF aligns with national efforts to build food resilience and encourage biodiversity-friendly food growing under the Community Climate Action Plan.

ABOUT GIY

GIY is a proud non-profit, social enterprise founded in Waterford, Ireland. We are on a mission to inspire a movement of people to grow food for a healthy and sustainable future. Since our founding in 2008, GIY has reached over 6 million people - inspiring, engaging and supporting them on their food-growing journey. Through initiatives like LEAF, GIY helps individuals and groups create sustainable food-growing projects that improve food security and enhance local green spaces

WHY GROW YOUR OWN FOOD?

Most of us love the idea of growing fresh, organic, healthy food for ourselves and our families. So why don't more of us do it? The most common reasons people give are: "I tried it once, and I don't have green fingers" or "I don't have the space". These are myths that we're here to bust! Success in food growing is about learning a few basic skills and building confidence. That's where LEAF comes in. Whether you have a small garden, a balcony, or

just a windowsill, LEAF will guide you through the essentials. With easy-to-follow video lessons at libraryleaf.ie, practical tips, and expert advice from the GIY team, you'll soon gain the confidence to grow your own food.

GROW TOGETHER

The only thing better than growing your own food is growing your own food with a community! Community can be found anywhere, it could be you and your neighbours sharing some veg, it could be joining your local community garden, or starting a growing group with your local Men's Shed, Knitting Group, or Sports club - where you grow at home and come together and share seeds, produce, tips and tricks. During the LEAF programme your local library will be a hub for growing knowledge and community, ask your library what local groups are growing with LEAF!

WHAT WILL I GROW?

You can pick up free seeds like oriental greens, beans, and peas at your local participating library.

WHAT SKILLS WILL I LEARN IN THIS BOOKLET?

- Seed sowing basics
- Soil preparation
- Looking after seedlings
- Harvesting your produce
- What equipment do I need?

Very little! All you need is some seeds, peat-free compost, and pots or containers.



PEAS

We've become so used to buying frozen peas, most people don't get to see them growing in pods anymore. This is a shame, because freshly-picked peas are one of life's great treats. They are a joy for children to pick and eat direct from the garden!



	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Sow			°	°	°	°						
Harvest						°	°					

WHERE AND WHEN TO SOW

Peas can be grown in lots of different ways. You can grow them in pots or trays to harvest the 'shoots' for salads. You can sow them in trays and plant them on later in to larger containers or in to the soil in the garden. You can even sow them direct in the soil outside. Fill one of the larger pots or tray with compost and sow peas 5cm apart and 5cm deep. If sowing direct in the soil, follow the same approach. Make a 5cm drill and sow peas 5cm apart, cover with soil and tamp down with a rake.

GROWING NOTES

- You can start eating the pea shoots when they are 8-10cm tall – delicious in salads!
- To grow them on (to produce peas) you will need to transplant them to a larger pot, window box or in to the soil. The peas will need support as they grow – pea netting, chicken wire or twiggly sticks will do the job.

GIY TIPS

- 1 Some GIYers sow peas in lengths of guttering filled with compost. When the peas have germinated they slide the contents out in to a drill in the garden!
- 2 Peas are a good source of Pro-Vitamin A and Vitamins C, B1 and folic acid.



ORIENTAL GREENS (MIXED)

For salads with a spicy twist, choose this mix of Mibuna, Mustard Red Giant, Pak Choi, Komatsuma, Mizuna, Wonk Bok (we're not making this up). Ready to eat in just 3 weeks. Ideal for containers



	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Sow	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°
Harvest	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°

WHERE AND WHEN TO SOW

Sow all year around for a consistent supply. Fill a 8cm pot with compost and sow the seeds lightly on the surface, covering with a thin layer of compost. For a bigger crop, sow larger quantities of seeds in a seed tray or window box filled with potting compost.

GROWING NOTES

- Keep the soil moist. Harvest when the leaves are 10-15cm tall, usually after 3-4 weeks.
- Sow little and often for lots of tender, tasty leaves.

GIY TIPS

- 1 This is a 'cut and come again' crop, which means when you cut it back it can produce another crop of delicious leaves.
- 2 Large oriental greens can be cooked in stir-frys.





FRENCH BEANS (DWARF GONDOLA)

You can't miss these beans - they are tender, full of flavour, and grow compactly, making them ideal for small gardens or containers. They produce straight, smooth pods that are a joy to harvest and cook.

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Sow				°	°	°						
Harvest						°	°	°				

WHERE AND WHEN TO SOW

Sow directly into the ground (4cm deep) in May to July (or in April indoors).

Alternatively, sow 3 seeds into a 9cm pot or one seed per module indoors (April – June) and plant out about 4 weeks later.

Leave 40cm between rows and 15cm between each seed/plant.

GROWING NOTES

- These beans prefer warm, sunny spots and well-draining, fertile soil.
- Water regularly but avoid waterlogging.
- If planting in a container, choose a relatively large one for proper growth.

GIY TIPS

- 1 Pick beans when young and tender, typically 60-70 days from sowing.
- 2 Regular harvesting will encourage new pods to develop.
- 3 Beans left to mature can be used as dried beans for soups and stews.



GETTING ORGANISED AND MAKING A PLAN

- Decide what you want to grow: Start with crops that are easy to manage and yield quick results, such as lettuce, spinach, or radishes. The 25 libraries taking part in the LEAF programme have free seeds available, including oriental greens, peas, and beans. These crops are perfect for beginners and grow well in small spaces.
- Assess your space: Determine whether you'll grow indoors or outdoors. For indoor growing, a sunny windowsill can work wonders. If outdoors, even a small patch of soil or containers on a balcony can suffice.
- Evaluate sunlight: Most vegetables and herbs need at least 6 hours of direct sunlight a day. Observe your chosen area to ensure your plants will get enough light.
- Prepare your soil: Healthy soil is the foundation of successful growing. Use peat-free compost mixed with organic matter like well-rotted manure or homemade compost for best results.
- Plan for watering: Ensure your growing space has easy access to water. Indoor growers can use a watering can, while outdoor growers might consider rain barrels or watering systems for efficiency.
- Get organised: Gather your supplies before you start. Essentials include:
 - Peat-free compost
 - Seed trays, pots, or containers (recycled options like yoghurt pots are great!)
 - Labels or markers to identify your plants
 - A small trowel, gloves, and a watering can or spray bottle

Pro Tip: Start small! Focus on a few crops in your first growing season. Success with a manageable amount will build your confidence to expand later.





LEARN HOW TO SOW

SOWING SEEDS: A SIMPLE AND REWARDING START TO GROWING

Starting your journey into growing your own food begins with the simple act of sowing seeds. It's straightforward, satisfying, and a gateway to nurturing plants that will, in turn, nurture you. Here's a step-by-step guide to get you started:

1 Prepare Your Pots or Trays

Begin by filling your chosen pots or seed trays with seed compost. Gently press the compost down to remove air pockets but avoid compacting it too much—your seeds need room to breathe and grow.

2 Create Seed Holes

Using your finger, a pencil, or a dibber, make small holes in the compost. Check the instructions on your seed packet for the recommended depth, as this can vary (typically 1–2 cm).

3 Sow Your Seeds

Drop one or two seeds into each hole. Be mindful not to overcrowd them—your seeds need space to develop into healthy seedlings.

4 Cover and Water

Lightly cover the seeds with a thin layer of compost. Use your fingertips to pat the surface gently, securing the seeds in place. Water the compost lightly with a watering can fitted with a fine rose to avoid displacing the seeds.

5 Label Your Sowing

Don't skip this step! Label each pot or tray with the seed variety and the date sown. This helps you keep track of what's growing where and when it was planted.

6 Provide the Right Conditions

Place your pots in a warm, sunny spot—a windowsill or greenhouse works well. Aim to keep the compost moist (not waterlogged) as seeds germinate best with consistent moisture.

PRO TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- *Timing is Everything:* Different seeds have different ideal sowing times. Check your seed packet for guidance.
- *Light and Warmth:* Some seeds, like lettuce, need light to germinate, so avoid covering them with compost. Others prefer darkness. A temperature of around 20°C is perfect for most seeds.
- *Gentle Care:* Avoid overwatering—your seeds are delicate, and soggy conditions can lead to rot.

WATCH THE MAGIC HAPPEN

Seeds are nature's little miracles, each holding the potential to grow into a thriving plant. Keep an eye on your pots, and soon you'll spot the first signs of green shoots breaking through. Whether you're growing herbs, flowers, or veg, the sense of accomplishment is unmatched.

Remember, sowing seeds is not just about planting; it's the beginning of a journey towards food empathy and connection with nature—a rewarding experience for everyone, no matter their level of expertise.





LOOKING AFTER YOUR SEEDLINGS

CARING FOR YOUR SEEDLINGS: NURTURING THE NEXT STAGE

Congratulations—your seeds have sprouted! Those tiny green shoots are a testament to your efforts and a sign of the growing success to come. Seedlings are delicate at this stage, so here's how to give them the best start:

1 **Light: Help Them Grow Straight and Strong**

Seedlings need plenty of light to develop into healthy plants. Aim for 6–8 hours of sunlight each day. If growing indoors, place them on a bright windowsill or under grow lights. Remember to rotate the pots regularly—seedlings naturally lean towards the light and rotating them ensures they grow straight and sturdy.

2 **Water: Keep Them Hydrated but Happy**

Seedlings thrive in damp compost, but soggy conditions can spell disaster. Use a gentle touch when watering—a small watering can with a fine rose, or a spray bottle is ideal. Keep the compost moist but not waterlogged, as overwatering can lead to issues like damping-off disease.

3 **Thinning: Give Them Space to Flourish**

As seedlings grow to about 5 cm tall, you'll notice clusters of them vying for space. It's time to thin them out, removing the weaker ones to allow the strongest to thrive. This might feel harsh, but it's essential for healthy, well-spaced plants. Use scissors to snip the weaker seedlings at the base rather than pulling them out—this minimises disturbance to the roots of the remaining plants.

4 **Temperature: Maintain a Cosy Environment**

Seedlings are sensitive to temperature fluctuations. Keep them in a stable environment, ideally between 18–22°C. Avoid placing them in draughty areas or directly above radiators, as this can dry them out too quickly.

PRO TIPS FOR THRIVING SEEDLINGS

- *Gradual Acclimatisation:* If you're planning to move your seedlings outdoors, harden them off first. Gradually expose them to outdoor conditions over 7–10 days, increasing the time they spend outside each day.
- *Gentle Strengthening:* To encourage strong stems, you can gently brush your hand across the tops of the seedlings a couple of times a day. This simulates the effects of wind and helps them grow sturdier.

CELEBRATE THEIR PROGRESS

Watching seedlings grow is one of the most rewarding stages of the growing journey. With your care and attention, these little plants will soon be ready to take the next step—whether into larger pots, garden beds, or the great outdoors. Every day, they're closer to becoming the thriving plants you envisioned when you sowed those seeds.





HARVESTING YOUR CROPS: ENJOY THE FRUITS OF YOUR LABOUR

HARVESTING YOUR CROPS: ENJOY THE FRUITS OF YOUR LABOUR

Reaching harvest time is the moment every grower dreams of—the ultimate reward for your care and patience. There’s nothing quite like the satisfaction of picking fresh food you’ve grown yourself.

Here’s how to make the most of this exciting stage:

1 **Leafy Greens: Young, Tender, and Delicious**

For crops like lettuce, spinach, and kale, the key is to harvest the leaves when they are young and tender. Use scissors or your fingers to snip outer leaves first, leaving the central ones to continue growing. This way, you can enjoy multiple harvests from the same plant.

2 **Peas and Beans: Plump Pods, Perfect Timing**

Keep an eye on your pea and bean plants as the pods begin to fill out. They’re ready for picking when the pods feel plump and firm but still tender. Avoid leaving them too long, as older pods can become tough and lose flavour. Regular picking encourages the plants to produce more.

3 **Herbs: Snip and Savour**

Herbs like basil, mint, and parsley thrive with regular harvesting. Use scissors to snip sprigs just above a set of leaves—this encourages bushier growth and ensures a continuous supply of fresh herbs. Remember, the more you use, the more they grow!

4 **Root Vegetables: A Little Peek Under the Soil**

For root crops like carrots or radishes, gently brush away the soil at the base of the plant to check their size. If they’ve reached the right diameter (usually noted on the seed packet), they’re ready to pull. Twist slightly as you lift to avoid damaging the roots.

PRO TIPS FOR A BOUNTIFUL HARVEST

- *Harvest Little and Often:* Picking small amounts frequently keeps many plants producing for longer and ensures your crops are at their freshest and tastiest.
- *Morning Picks:* Harvest leafy greens in the morning when they’re crisp and full of moisture, especially on hot days.
- *Share the Joy:* If your crops come in abundance, consider sharing with friends or neighbours—it’s a great way to spread the joy of growing.

CELEBRATE THE JOURNEY FROM PLOT TO PLATE

Harvesting is not just about food; it’s about the connection you’ve cultivated with the earth, the seasons, and your own hands. Take a moment to savour the experience—whether it’s the crisp snap of a freshly picked pea or the aromatic burst of freshly cut basil. You’ve earned it.







TOGETHER WE GROW

"Growing food is about more than just fresh produce; it's about building community, fostering resilience, and supporting biodiversity."

CALL TO ACTION

Join the growing movement today! Visit your local library or contact GIY to start your community growing journey.

Contact Information:

- 📍 www.giy.ie
- ✉ info@giy.ie
- ☎ 051 584422



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