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Planting a Summer Garden

With grocery costs rising, most consumers are looking for ways to reduce spending at the grocery store. One way is to plant a vegetable garden. With the proper planning, your summer harvest could save you money through the winter.

The first thing to consider when planting a garden is location. A garden should have at least six hours of sunlight daily and, for convenience, be close to your outdoor water supply. A garden that's a hassle to water probably won't get watered enough.

When it comes to vegetable selection, pick what you like. If vegetables make up a major portion of your diet, starting plants from seeds indoors is a cost effective way to begin your garden. If it's too late to start that, check out farmers' markets or plant sales for less expensive plants left over from the farm's spring plant. If this is your first attempt at a garden, consider starting small to see if you enjoy keeping up with garden maintenance, like weeding and watering.

You might find you need a fence around the garden to keep out animals interested in your crop. The fence may also provide support for plants like peas and tomatoes. There are some garden plants that are perennial, like rhubarb and asparagus. Consider their placement when planning out your garden. Most herbs are perennials as well.

As you enjoy your summer harvest, think about how to use the excess as winter pantry supplies. Can the tomatoes or make tomato sauce. Pickle cucumbers or dehydrate herbs for your spices. Not only will you save some additional money in the winter, you'll also have a taste of summer in your meals.

Tips

School is winding down for the year and a long summer stretches before us...what to do? Here are some tips for finding low cost, or free, summer activities to help pass the time.

- Check with your local library for summer reading programs. Most programs connect activities to the reading programs and, in some cases, there are prizes involved!
- Some movie theater chains host weekly movie showings for a price far less than the cost of a typical ticket. The movies are usually kid oriented and a tad older.
- The two major home improvement stores often host free summer workshops for kids. Activities include making things like bird houses or picture frames.
- If you have a Bank of America credit, debit or ATM card you could receive free admission to museums in your area the first weekend of the month. Check out <https://museums.bankofamerica.com> to see if there's a museum near you.



Q: Will buying energy efficient appliances really help reduce my utility costs?

A: In most cases, the answer is yes. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Energy developed the Energy Star label to make it easier for consumers to purchase energy efficient appliances that will save money on utility bills. Products with this label are tested and proven to be energy efficient. Energy Star refrigerators use 40% less energy than conventional models and Energy Star clothes washers use between 40 and 50% less energy and 55% less water.

Some products with the Energy Star label can be more expensive than a product without the label. If that is the case, it must be proven that the buyer will recover their investment through utility bill savings, within a reasonable period of time. Outfitting your home with mostly Energy Star appliances will likely save you \$80 a year in utility bills.

If your budget doesn't allow for purchasing new appliances, there are ways to run your current appliances efficiently. Vacuum the coils in the back of your refrigerator twice a year. Wash your clothes on either the warm or cold setting. Dry your clothes outside or use an indoor drying rack. Run your dishwasher only when it's full and use short wash cycles for everything except the dirtiest dishes.

Planning for College Costs

In today's reality of rising prices, declining wages and tight budgets, saving for your child's college education may seem like a daunting task. However, it's something to think about and there are ways to save for college in a tight budget.

Before making saving for a college a priority in your budget, you should first make sure you have emergency savings set aside and that you have also established a saving plan for your retirement. Your child will have the option of student loans to fund his education, so saving for retirement should be a higher priority.

The first step in planning for college expenses is determining how much you will likely need to save. If you have a newborn that will enter college in 2030, you will likely need to save \$312,166 to cover the entire cost. That works out to approximately, \$602 a month. If your child is 5, you'll need to save \$233,269 or \$730 a month and if your child is 10, you'll need \$174,312, which means saving \$970 a month. These are overwhelming figures and highly unlikely savings goals for most families, especially with multiple children.

However, when it comes to savings, something is always better than nothing. What can you afford to set aside monthly for your child's future education? If you save \$100 a month for 18 years in an account with an eight percent average annual return rate, you will save \$48,000. It might not cover the entire tuition cost, but it does help.

A popular way for parents to save for future college expenses is through 529 college savings plans. These plans are available in most states (Pennsylvania's is administered by the State Treasury Department). 529 plans can be started at any time,

no matter the age of the beneficiary, and there are no income limitations. The savings grow tax deferred and distributions from the account to pay for or qualified expenses, like tuition, is federally tax free. The money saved can be used to cover costs at colleges, universities, career schools, or law and medical schools, among others. In most cases, you can open a 529 savings plan with as little as \$25 and make contributions whenever you want. In most cases, plans charge a reasonable set fee and an annual maintenance fee of .5%.

If setting aside money for your child's college education isn't possible, but helping with tuition expenses is, two federal tax credits are available while you're paying tuition. You can receive a tax credit of up to \$2,500 when filing for The American Opportunity Tax Credit and the Lifetime Learning Credit.

If you're concerned about being approved for financial aid, know that the approval process for student loans is more lenient than other types of loans and the repayment options vary. In some cases, the loan's interest rate may be reduced if you set up the payment with an automatic debit from your bank account.

Taxpayers paying student loans are also eligible for tax breaks. If you file your taxes as a single person and your income is less than \$70,000 a year or married with income less than \$145,000 you can deduct the interest up to \$2,500.

If your child takes out student loans, it's a good idea to encourage him or her to take on a job while attending school and start paying the loans while they have no other debt. Getting ahead on their student loans can reduce their financial burden after graduation.

Resources

<http://museums.bankofamerica.com>

www.usda.gov

www.savingforcollege.com

www.pa529.com

www.advantageccs.org

www.bankrate.com

The Advantage Challenge

Advantage CCS challenges you to ...take advantage of free summer activities. Plan ahead and see what's available. Check with local parks for movies in the park showings or seek out festivals with free entertainment. Sign up for your library's summer reading program or investigate other free, fun things in your area. Aim for attending at least two free activities each month and let us know what you did and how you found it. Email your results to hmurray@advantageccs.org.



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