



Season 1 Episode 1 – So You Want to Grow a Garden

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Brian Brown

From the Ground Up, a podcast of the Alabama Extension Home Grounds Team educating you about home landscapes, gardens and home pests.

Brian Brown

Thank you for joining us today. Today, we have Dani Carroll with us. Dani is a regional extension agent in East Central Alabama. Question I have for you, Dani, is, you know, if I'm a new gardener, what do I need to do to start a garden? I have never garden before in my life, so how would I start to do that?

Dani Carroll

Well, first of all, that's really awesome that you're going to start gardening. And I'm assuming you're talking about growing your own food today.

Brian Brown

Yeah, that's right. That's right.

Dani Carroll

And I think that's great. More and more people are doing that. And there's a lot of things to consider, especially if this is your very first time or your fix, not break ground for the very first time. You know, and I can give you some examples in my own yard because I just moved. And so now that I've moved, I'm having to make some of the big decisions which are how do I want to garden? Do I want like a typical in-ground garden? Do I want to go with containers, you know, And there's a lot of backyard hydroponic systems.

There's just a lot of a lot of variability in the way to do it.

Brian Brown

What would be the least complicated way to do this?

Dani Carroll

I think the least complicated way is either going to be in ground or in containers. And just like everything else, there are pros and cons, you know, to everything we do.

Brian Brown

If you wanted to, let's say you have a small plot of land behind my house and, you know, let's say it's a thousand square feet, I mean, that's probably a pretty good sized garden. What kind of equipment would I need to use to till up the land, or do I need a tiller or can I do a no-till or tell me some things that I might need to start?

Dani Carroll

Well, we're going to we're going to back up a minute and really look at this. Thousands.

Brian Brown

Well, I'm really excited about building the garden, Dani

Dani Carroll

I know you're really excited, so we're going to step back for a minute and take some things into consideration. Number one is this thousand square feet in full sun.

Brian Brown

Oh, yeah. You know, because a lot of times we have a place to garden, but it might not be the best place to plant the garden. So are we in full sun?

Dani Carroll

And second thing I would look at. Do you have a water source nearby? Because I know we're in Alabama and we do get ample amounts of rainfall. But, you know, if we're growing tomatoes, a tomato is tomato flavored water. So having a water source and being able to provide consistent amounts of water throughout the year, that's really, really going to help. Number one, the health of the plants. Of course, we go through drought times to drought periods. So that that water is very important. Those are two things I would look at first before I even started to break ground.

Brian Brown

You know, let's say you have ample source of water. I guess you can use city water or, you know, if you want to catch water off your house or something like that, those are totally viable things to do, right?

Dani Carroll

Oh, yeah. Those are awesome things to do. You know, if we're going to go with a drip irrigation kit or something like that, you know, city water's fine. Yeah, other water sources are fine. Sometimes it's hard when we're catching water in rain barrels to use that, whether with the drip irrigation system, you know, are we going to water by hand? Different things to take to take into consideration there.

Brian Brown

Obviously, you know, we've had a pretty wet last actually, probably the last couple of years has been fairly wet in Alabama, I would say, wouldn't you?

Dani Carroll

It's... it's fairly wet and it looks like there's more to come this week

Brian Brown

that usually, you know, that's the ideal scenario. If it would rain a couple of times a week, that would probably be great, right?

Dani Carroll

If it would rain an inch of water, I mean, our average is, what, about 50, 52 inches per year. So that averages out to an inch of water per week. But of course, we're not going to get an inch of water per week.

Brian Brown

We never get it at the right time.

Dani Carroll

We don't. And it's so funny because we can get a lot of rain, a lot of rain in just a couple of weeks. And then we think our vegetable gardens are good. But, you know, we're only when it comes to gardening, especially fruits and vegetables, we're only a week away from needing water again.

Brian Brown

Yeah.

Dani Carroll

Especially if we're on the right soils. But let's go back and talk about that thousand square feet. You. Yes. Ready to go?

Brian Brown

Yeah, absolutely. So we have, you know, my backyard. I have 1000 square feet. So what do I do first?

Dani Carroll

Okay, so we know we've got water. We know we've got ample sun. Next thing we're going to look at is what is what kind of vegetation as they are now? Because honestly, when it comes to gardening, the chore that I would say the majority and I'm speaking for everyone right here,

Brian Brown

Totally fine.

Dani Carroll

But weeding the garden is a chore. And not only is it a chore, but it's something that really has to be done because weeds in the garden, number one, they can carry pest insect diseases. Number two, they're really going to take away the nutrients and the water from what we're wanting to grow. Mm hmm. So we really want to look and see, you know, what's there in that thousand square feet as let's be honest, if it's in Bermuda grass, that's going to be really hard to control.

Brian Brown

Mm hmm.

Dani Carroll

Once we remove the grass and get our soil, that's going to start creeping back in.

Brian Brown

Yeah.

Dani Carroll

So it's, you know what vegetation is planted there. How easy is it going to be to just devoid that area of all that vegetation? And that's what I would concentrate on first.

Brian Brown

What do we do then? We have a weedy you know, it's fairly flat, have water. I have sun, but it's really weedy
What do you do?

Dani Carroll

Well, really, weed is a big one. And we have a couple of choices that we can do. So, number one, preparation is everything when we're getting ready to get that plot ready. So when we're out there looking at the vegetation, we can think of this a couple of ways. We're prepping this ground and getting rid of the vegetation for something we are going to plant in the future. And it's how long what is our do we have months before we're going to plant? Do we have weeks before we're going to plant? Honestly, if it's a thousand square feet, if it's ten square feet, preparation is everything. And trying to get rid of all the weeds last minute is not going to be the way to go. We can start now to plant later. We could have started in the fall to plant now, but some things I would do and there's a lot of different methods to do this. You know, number one, there's herbicides. Not everyone is going to want to use a herbicide.

Brian Brown

Yeah.

Dani Carroll

But there are herbicides that we can use and we can safely plant a couple of weeks later. Having said that, herbicides actually take a couple of weeks to work as well. So that would be done, you know, a month or two ahead of time. There's other ways too. So we can do something like a lasagna method where we're starting to compost and put down even, you know, newspapers and or boxes, cardboard boxes layered with compost and kind of let nature do its thing. But again, that's going to take several, several months to get that plot right.

Brian Brown

So if you do the lasagna method, you start in the fall, right?

Dani Carroll

I would start months and months ahead of time.

Brian Brown

Okay.

Dani Carroll

To be able to avoid that of vegetation. And then there's the old fashioned way. That's a shovel. Yes, kind of get it. Nobody wants to do that. Going out and shovel skimming. And shovel skimming that vegetation off And just because we get rid of the vegetation that way or by herbicides or any other way, the vegetation is going to come back.

Brian Brown

Yeah.

Dani Carroll

So it's something always in the back of the head, Hey this is going to be a chore.

Brian Brown

Yeah. A lot of these weeds, they're borne from the roots or they have some tubers or something like that under the ground and they're hard to kill. I mean, even in your yard or anything,

Dani Carroll

They're going to do that and then might have well us, we have us, maybe we're out there mowing the grass and blow and weed seeds everywhere and other birds. There's tons of ways that the weeds are going to get in there. But you know what? You really get that vegetation gone. You can start looking at the soil itself. And again, we're going to go back to soil health and organic matters in that soil. So your soil is probably going to be totally different from mine. Yeah, you're on a very clay soil and I am on a very sandy soil. Extremely sandy. Yeah, but the good thing about that is adding organic matter to the soil is going to be a win for both of us.

Brian Brown

Yeah, I get a lot of calls about people who, you know, they, they are heavy clay soils because I'm in, you know I'm based in northeast Alabama, so I get a lot of calls about these. You know, they have a lot of rocks in their soil, heavy clays. So organic matter is good for that also.

Dani Carroll

it's going to be awesome for that because it's going to actually improve water infiltration. So water it's going to improve the drainage of that soil. And, you know, vegetable roots are very tender. They do not like to have wet feet. That's a very popular garden term. But they don't they're not going to thrive well, and there's a lot of diseases that they can get when they are sitting in mucky soils.

Brian Brown

Yeah.

Dani Carroll

So that organic matter is going to help you. And not only is it going to add to the health, it's going to increase the air that's able to move through the soil, it's going to increase the water filtration going through and all my sandy soils, it's kind of going to do the same thing. But opposite it is going to again, help with the health of the soil, bringing in those also microbes that do great work on the ground for us. But for me, on the sandy soil, it's going to help me keep a little water in there.

Brian Brown

All right. So now we have established where our plot is going to be. It's all good. We have water, sun, now we need to prepare the soil so we're taking care of the weeds. So what's our next step here?

Dani Carroll

Well, Brian, most of our soils are lacking in organic matter. Again, we just kind of talked about the pros and cons of adding them to the to a place all our a sandy soil. And I would go ahead and be adding those types of things. You know, organic matter comes in a lot of different bases and there we could also have grown some cover crops and use those to turn over as far as organic matter goes. But I would make sure that I add that organic matter and kind of get that mixed in to those top six or so inches of the soil as deep as we can get it. And then with those in-ground gardens, I would 100% get a soil sample just to make sure that my pH was correct. Because if the pH isn't right. It's very hard to correct it after the vegetables go in.

Brian Brown

Yeah. And so if you if you have any questions about taking a soil test, we have a website on ACES.edu that will tell you it's a video on how to take a proper soil sample. And you can also go to your local Extension office and pick up a soil testing box and then mail it to the Auburn Soil testing lab.

Dani Carroll

But I would definitely do that before, you know, couple of months beforehand to... just so we can get that pH up to speed if we need to do that because that has a lot to do with nutrient take up the plant and having it in that right, the right pH or the plants that you are going to grow. But this is a great time to talk about. You've got this thousand square feet and it's perfect. You know, as far as sun and water goes, but maybe you don't want to maybe you just don't want to mess with the soil. Yeah, you know, maybe so maybe that's a that maybe that's a lot. Maybe it's just too clay. And you don't have the time to. To put in the. The organic matter that it needs or the time to get it together. And for a lot of folks that is a perfect place for raised beds. And so the raised beds would actually go on top of the soil. Of course they're raised out. I like them. I think 12 inches is a is a decent depth for those.

Brian Brown

Yeah.

Dani Carroll

But just like a in-ground garden, I would like to kind of get rid of the weeds underneath because some of these weeds are very, very smart. And they can actually creep up and come in and so I do like to get rid of those and you know, if you put in a raised bed on top, I'm not a big user of landscape fabric, not in the landscape anyway, because it does have a few problems that I see. But putting it under a raised bed, you're still going to have the water drainage. That's an option, too.

Brian Brown

Okay, so raised beds, you know, using wood to frame it up and then fill it in. What do you what do you fill in a raised bed with?

Dani Carroll

The beauty of raised beds are they can be made out of so many different types of material from wood cinder blocks. I'm sure we have all seen, you know, the images with the tin. Some of them are made out of tin. And so that's the little baby swimming pools.

Brian Brown

Oh, yeah.

Dani Carroll

So I've seen many, many, many different types. And a lot of folks are getting very creative with what they're making raised beds out of. Now, again, one of the pros, like I said, there's kind of a pro and a con to everything. And one of the pros was with the raised bed is we are creating the soil in it so we know it drains well. We know it's going to be a healthy soil. The big con to that is that could actually mean the little extra money went into the creation of that raised bed. I mean some great soils and we have recipes online too with using just some of the native soil not a lot because obviously you don't want to fill a bed with just the soil from your yard. It kind of defeats the purpose of doing it. So we're going to mix that again with a lot of organic matter I like to use, and they make raised bed soils ready to buy at stores and stuff. But if you want to make your own again, we have recipes, but using some of the native soil from the ground.

Brian Brown

I like to use some family crushed pine bark along with a with some compost mixed up together. Now when we do this, we could run a test on it just to see if our page is right. We're not going to run a saw test on this because it's mostly organic matter and other materials, but not soil. Once you have your raised bed or in-ground vegetables or you got your ground prepared, what do we do next? Do we start from seed or do we buy transplants or is that just really depend on when you plant?

Dani Carroll

Well, that also totally depends on what you're planting. Like, there are a lot. And since we're going into the warm season, we'll talk about warm season vegetables. There are a lot of warm season vegetables that are going to do much better or are just fine, putting the seed into the ground. And those are going to be like our cucurbits meaning our squashes, watermelons, cucumbers, musk melons, cantaloupes all of those guys so direct seeded they're fine if we go into like bush beans in pole beans again direct seeded corn the same and we could go on. I start a lot of my own transplants indoors and there's honestly only three or four that I would start inside. And those are going to be tomatoes or eggplant and peppers.

Brian Brown

So those are really the main ones that you grow from a transplant, your tomatoes, eggplant and peppers. Right.

Dani Carroll

And those are the ones just trying to get a little jump on the season. I put in a plan out that's six or seven weeks old rather than the seed.

Brian Brown

Yeah. So do you get you get your fruit faster, Right?

Dani Carroll

You can get the fruit faster. It's kind of funny, though, because if you have grown vegetables before, you're probably if you've ever, you know, left a tomato hanging from the vine that fell off you, you'll notice that those will reseed themselves and you'll see seeds coming up. So yeah, you could direct seed, but yeah, you can get things, especially those a little bit earlier by growing from transplants.

Brian Brown

So plants need food just like we do fertilizer. What type of fertilizer would you recommend? Is there any one that's better than the other? Should I use something like a slow release fertilizer or, you know, what's best?

Dani Carroll

So in those in-ground gardens where we took a soil test and that soil test is going to come back and give you a fertilizer recommendation actually based on the nutrients that were found in your soil with the raised bed gardens, we didn't really actually do a soil test. We did more of a pH test. I can give you the basic for most vegetables, we're going to need about a pound of nitrogen per thousand square feet. You know, depending on the fertilizer that you use, you can kind of base it off that pound of nitrogen per thousand square feet.

Brian Brown

Yeah. How do you apply that? You just kind of

Dani Carroll

in my raised beds, I do use a slow release, I use a slow release to start off with our season. And Alabama is really, really long, you know, it's what are we at the end of March 1st of April now and so the warm season is going to go on till October November in south Alabama. So that's a long time. And so they get hungry more than what

Brian Brown

. You know, I think there's a lot of people who recently moved Alabama, especially in north Alabama. We have a lot of newcomers from up north and they can't believe that our season is so long. It's just amazing to them that they can grow vegetables starting in, you know, really, we almost can grow year round.

Dani Carroll

We do grow year round. Yeah, yeah. And it's fun to grow year round. It gets to be a little bit of a problem in the fall because when those temperatures start to drop in the fall, my warm season, vegetables start going crazy because they love those.

Dani Carroll

As the temperature starts to drop a little bit and give them some relief. But then it's time to plant the fall.

Brian Brown

Yeah, and you hate it.

Dani Carroll

And I hate to tag something else. Exactly.

Brian Brown

We do have a really long growing season and we do have to fertilize.

Dani Carroll

We're going to have to fertilize more than once. So I like to start off in raised beds with maybe a slow release. And then I wish there was a rule of thumb, like every four weeks or every five weeks, but sometimes we get so much rain that the nutrients go away, you know, quicker. So we're having to add them more frequently with containers. And when we talk about those in a minute, those are even kind of a completely different story, but in the ground, too, I will come back, you know, at least twice during the growing season with things like tomatoes, peppers, etc., with some additional or a side dress of fertilizer during the season. The only thing I think I would not do that we had is our beans are other things in the lagoon family which they make their own nitrogen so we can over fertilize those really easily.

Brian Brown

What about problems? Like I know here in Alabama we have a lot of problems with funguses. We have a lot of fungi because we have high humidity and high heat, which a lot of fungi really love. What do we do about that insect damage? We also have a lot of insects here in Alabama, so.

Dani Carroll

Well, we do it because we are very blessed to live in Alabama where we had this nice, warm, long climate with ample rainfall. And it's good for us, it's good for growing, it's good for the insects, it's good for the diseases. Yeah. So we're all taking advantage of it. Yeah, there's a lot of insects and diseases to contend with. So first of all, starting off with those healthy soils, that's number one, because we do have a lot of soil diseases. Number two, there's a lot of things we can do culturally in our gardens to help with some of these pest pressures, and we can do that by looking at the varieties that we grow. So some varieties will have defenses tolerances to some of the diseases, while maybe some of the other varieties of the same plant may not. This kind of research, what we're going to grow and what works best for Alabama because you know, we can buy a lot of different kinds of

seeds off the Internet now, but some of those might be tailored for more of the cooler climates. And maybe not so much tolerant of the diseases that we're going to have here in Alabama. Spacing- You know, a lot of these diseases, especially when I talk about the foliar diseases, they love it when there's no airflow because the humidity rises and they're jumping from plant to plant. So even plant spacing, mulching, mulching is huge. I like to tell folks, never leave that garden naked and never leave that soil exposed. Let's get some kind of mulch on there. The number one that's going to help with our holding and our moisture and that's going to keep back splash and a lot of water from coming back on the leaves. You know, rain is a good thing and we need the rain. But you'll see in years when we have a lot of rainfall in the summer, our disease pressures are also increased. So if we can water the base of the plants, you know, drip irrigation, even if we're hand watering, trying to keep it off the foliage, those are just a few things that we can do. Now, insects, that's a different story. And I think when people start gardening, the fun thing about it is being able to recognize insect pests versus beneficial insects and kind of seeing the onset of what might be a fungal disease and learning what to do. Yeah, I think a lot of people, they assume all insects are bad, but there's a lot of great insects that pollinate or help.

Brian Brown

I mean, there's beneficial insects that eat other insects too, So.

Dani Carroll

That's right. And that's part of the fun of gardening is not just learning about the plants and being able to eat what you grow, but learning about the dynamics that go on in that garden as well.

Brian Brown

Yeah. And so proper identification of proper identification is crucial, especially if you're going to apply some kind of pesticide on there, whether it's organic or inorganic, it doesn't matter.

Dani Carroll

Identification of what you're trying to control is number one, because you obviously do not want to use an insecticide that doesn't work on the insect that you're trying to control it. That makes sense.

Brian Brown

So you really have to know what insect you're trying to treat and properly identify it because you might end up killing something you don't want to.

Dani Carroll

That's right. Or just using unnecessary pesticides.

Brian Brown

Yeah, because it costs money.

Dani Carroll

And that's money.

Brian Brown

Yeah, that's right. So, and, you know, I'll just add, you know, I think gardening is I think people need to experiment. You know, that's I think that's part of it. Like you said, it's a learning process. So, you know, just go out and try it. You know, you learn something every year and take good notes too.

Dani Carroll

Hey, good notes crucial. It was probably about ten years ago that I actually started taking notes. I started doing what I still recommend to other people to do. And so, I feel good having this little notebook because I can look back in it and I can tell you like which week? Six years ago, squash vine borers came into central Alabama. And so, I'm aware now I'm well aware enough that I can look through my notebook and go, Oh, this is you can be ready sometime in the next week. This is going to happen, or even this variety was good, you know, worked for me. And it was something I liked. Yes. Let's face it, too. We all like different things. If you grow in a lot of different things, you know, I like to have next to there, "I did not like this one...I didn't like the taste of it" that way, I know not to waste my time growing it again.

Brian Brown

Yeah, absolutely. So where could somebody get some help, I'm stuck. I don't know what to do. I've watched too many YouTube videos, and every one of them has got a different opinion. So where can I get help?

Dani Carroll

Well, your local extension office is a great place to start. And I know you just said you just watch too many YouTube videos, but we have a wealth of videos on our grow more, give more page. I mean everything from varieties to raised beds, heirlooms, how to trellis, how to trellis certain vegetables, how to prune certain vegetables. So, there is a lot of information on there. And then of course, we have our master gardener help line. So, with about the master gardener help line. So, tell me a little about that. So that is a very that's a great service and we have wonderful Alabama master Gardener volunteers who actually volunteer their time to answer these gardening questions. They are a wealth of information. They have been gardening for years. They are they're like us. They like to experiment, but they also know where to get the information.

Brian Brown

So, if you have any questions about that, again, you can contact your local extension office. One of us home grounds can answer, or you can call the Master Gardener Helpline. It's 1-877-ALA-GROW. That's A-L-A-G-R-O-W. We'd be glad to answer your questions. And Dani thank you for joining us today. I hope everybody has learned some great info on how to start your garden. And again, if you need any help, just give us a call.

Dani Carroll

Thank you, Brian. Have a great day.

Brian Brown

From the Ground Up is a production of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.