

How to Garden Safely in Philadelphia

Under the leadership of Ash Richards, the Director of Urban Agriculture, Philadelphia Parks and Recreation kicked off the planning process to create Philadelphia's first ever Urban Agriculture Plan in 2019. The project is being supported by Soil Generation, a Black and brown-led coalition of gardeners, farmers, individuals, and community-based organizations; and Interface Studios, a local city planning and urban design firm.

Philadelphia has a rich history of agricultural practices that are rooted in African American, immigrant, and refugee communities. Many of these community spaces have been nurtured for generations. Urban agriculture is healing, it produces healthy and low-cost food, and it can provide a path to self-reliance and determination. Check out our tips on how to garden safely in Philadelphia!

Photos by Ali Mendelson.



1

Use Raised Beds

Much of Philly's land has been used for industrial or commercial operations. That means the soil may be contaminated with heavy metals like lead. Plant in raised beds to avoid contact with contaminated soil. Consider lining the raised bed with a barrier like landscaping fabric or cloth. This helps control weeds and keeps plant roots from growing into the ground soil.



These photos are from a series of workdays held at five community gardens throughout the city in 2016. The project was supported by the Philadelphia Department of Public Health, Philadelphia Food Policy Advisory Council, Philadelphia Land Bank, and Philadelphia Department of Parks and Recreation. Throughout the project, close to 500 people learned about soil safety, built raised beds, and took steps to limit soil contamination in the following gardens:

- HANNAH HOUSE GARDEN (911-25 W. Auburn St.)
- PENN KNOX GARDEN (5335 Green St.)
- 5 LOAVES AND 2 FISHES GARDEN (55th St and Jefferson Ave.)
- 25TH AND TASKER GARDEN
- SMITH-BARRICK PLAY GARDEN (2046-52 E. Hagert St.)
- HANSBERRY GARDEN (5150 Wayne Ave.)

2

Use Compost

Adding compost to your soil reduces the concentration of contaminants that might be in the soil. Compost also helps grow healthier plants because it is full of nutrients.



3

Cover Soil

Cover walkways and common areas to limit contact with soil dust. Soil dust may contain harmful contaminants like lead. Use materials like mulch, wood chips, landscape fabrics, or stones. You can also plant grass or other ground covering plants to prevent tracking contaminated soil into your home.

Cover the area around your plants to reduce soil contamination. Salt hay is a good material because it helps keep the soil moist.



ACTIVITY

4

Wash Hands and Wear Gloves

Always wash your hands after working in soil and make sure to wear gloves. This prevents soil from getting on your hands and then into your mouth. Make sure to use soap and water, not hand sanitizer.



5

Leave Soil in the Garden

Leave tools, boots, and gloves outside. Clean off or take off dirty clothes and shoes before going inside. Soil can turn into soil dust, which is then breathed into your body.



Wash and Peel Produce

Wash all produce before eating it. This is especially important for leafy vegetables like lettuce, collards, spinach, and kale. You can also remove the outer leaves before washing.

Peel all root vegetables like potatoes, turnips, and beets. They grow deep in the soil so washing and peeling these vegetables after harvest will prevent you from accidentally eating soil.



Know What to Grow

Avoid growing root vegetables and leafy greens in contaminated soil. Fruiting plants like tomatoes, cucumbers, squash, apples, and peppers are less likely to be affected by contaminated soil.

Keep an Eye on Children

Children can follow this guide too! Children are still growing and developing so contaminants like lead are especially harmful. Children are also more likely to put their hands in their mouths and may accidentally eat soil.



Create a Garden for All to Enjoy

Consider building your raised beds at different heights. A height of 20 inches is good for small children. A height of 24 inches is good for someone seated in a wheelchair. A height of 30 inches is good for someone who prefers to stand. Consider creating wider garden paths for wheelchair and walker accessibility.

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