

Garden Club Questions

As of July 9, 2025

Garden Set-up

- How do you determine the ideal **temperature** for your indoor garden?
 - Typically, the seed packets will indicate the ideal temperature for the plants. Because we are growing indoors, whatever temperature you set your house to is generally a good temperature for the garden. Plants, in general, like warmer temperatures and humidity. (We think the seed packets recommend between 60-80 degrees.)
- If you have a **radiator** with an ornamental cover, could you have the garden on top?
 - It's a good rule of thumb to keep plants away from the radiator since the heat and dryness may affect them. A common suggestion is to keep your garden on a kitchen counter or shelf.
- What is the best type of **water** to use?
 - The best type of water to use is distilled water, but tap water works well. Water to stay away from would be well water (as well as some mineral or spring water), as this sometimes contains things like magnesium that can affect the nutrients we add.
 - Can you use **soft water** for this kit? Is soft water okay to use for plants?
 - Based on our understanding, it should be okay to use! The only consistent warning is not to use well water.
 - Does the **chlorine** in tap water damage the plant growth?
 - If you know you have a high concentration of a specific mineral or chemical, you may want to leave your tap water out for a day before using it in the garden.
- **How many plants** will the planter hold?
 - The garden has 13 slots, but we recommend doing about 8 plants/pods at once, and spacing them evenly across the tray, so the plants do not get crowded.
- **How many seeds** do you typically put in each of the pods?
 - As a rule of thumb, about 3 or 4 seeds, anticipating just 1 or 2 will sprout. If more than 1 seed sprouts, remove all other sprouts, leaving only 1 in each pod. You can re-plant the removed sprouts in soil!
- Do seeds need to be **scarred, cut, or marked**?
 - No – the seeds in this kit do not need additional steps, just the pre-soak described in the planting video!
- Do all seeds need to be **soaked** first?



- They don't have to be, but it does speed up the germination process for all of our seeds!
- How many hours per day should we leave the **light** on?
 - The light will automatically be on a rotation of 16 hours on, 8 hours off. Once you turn on the power, vegetable light, and water pump, you won't have to turn them off again! We recommend that when you first turn it on, you turn it on in the morning, so the light doesn't stay on at night and bother you, but this isn't absolutely necessary.
- Do you need to wait for the seeds to sprout before adding **nutrients**?
 - You will add nutrients when you set up your garden, before the plants sprout. You will also want to add more nutrients every time you replace or add more water to the garden. For every 1L of water you add, add 5mL of each nutrient (Plant Food A and Plant Food B).
- Will it be a problem if I don't have **the center punch from my stickers**? They got lost (thrown out) during the 4 hours soaking my seeds. I covered with the rest of the sticker. Should I put something over the center hole in the sticker?
 - If the center dot does come off, that is okay. You can place a small sticker or piece of paper partially over the open center dot, or you can leave it open. The rest of the sticker should offer enough protection for the seeds as they sprout.
 - If the sprout grows a little crooked and has trouble poking through the center hole of the sticker, you can remove the sticker to let the sprout continue to grow.
- I tried to **register my garden kit**, but an order number was required. Is there an order number I should use to register it?
 - We're discussing this with our garden supplier now! Since we place bulk orders, we're determining how we can handle this. If you send us an email at kits@mather.com, we'll get back to you when we know more. Registering your kit is not required, but we know some participants may want to do so!
- Can we start seeds in the hydroponic garden and then **transplant them to pots**?
 - Yes! The pods are made of peat, so you can take them out of the garden and transplant them into soil. You want to transfer them into really saturated, watery soil, and keep the soil watery for about the first week, to give the plants a transition between all-water and all-soil environment.
 - If I am **transplanting** my plants to pots, is there a particular type of **soil** I should use?
 - There are different soils specifically for potted plants or vegetables. The most important thing is to transplant into super saturated soil at first, since you are transferring them directly from water.

- Do you have suggestions on **transplanting** from the hydroponic garden to regular soil? Running into a problem with **roots tangling** up with the plastic basket.
 - Roots naturally tangle up, but all the plants we are working with are hardy, so a little tearing or cutting of the roots when transplanting should be okay.
- Can you **transplant** an outdoor plant (like flowers) **to a hydroponic garden**?
 - This would be more difficult to do, since the outdoor plants are used to soil, as opposed to growing in water. You may be able to take cuttings from existing herbs, like mint or basil, and root those in pods in your hydroponic garden.
- In the various manuals and handouts, there are conflicting instructions on when to **remove the plastic domes**: when it touches dome, or when it first shows sign of germinating. When I left it longer after germination, I noticed transpiration happening - good or bad?
 - The dome traps humidity, which the seeds need when they're young and germinating. You want to remove the dome right before the plant touches the dome. A little transpiration (condensation/humidity inside the dome) is expected and good, as it shows the humidity building up.
- When planting, what is the **best combination of each plant** to use? Which plants are beneficial to grow side by side?
 - Basil and mint will produce a large harvest for a long period of time, so planting just one of each is good. Dandelions, arugula, and spinach produce more slowly, and you often use more at once, so you may want to plant multiple of each of those. You can also just grow more of what you like best!
 - Inside our hydroponic gardens, there is no particular benefit to arranging certain plants next to others. Just be sure to give the plants room to grow, so don't fill every slot in the garden!
- Should seeds be kept in the **fridge**?
 - No, they do not need to be refrigerated.
- Can the garden kit be placed on a kitchen counter above a **dishwasher**, or will the vibrations from the dishwasher prevent the seeds from growing?
 - If it's just an average dishwasher, and you're using it a normal amount, it probably shouldn't be a cause for concern. The dishwasher-produced humidity might even be nice for the plants! We would only worry if it was vibrating enough that water was sloshing out of the hydroponic garden.

Plants

- Can we use **regular seeds** or does this type of garden need a different type of seed?
 - Yes! You can use any regular seeds.
 - Some plants won't grow well in the hydroponic garden. For example, root vegetables like potatoes or carrots, or woody vegetables and herbs like rosemary will not grow very well. Some plants may need more space.
 - Large ornamental flowers may not bloom well, but smaller flowers on herbs (like chamomile and lavender) do very well in hydroponic gardens.
- Can you grow **tomatoes**?
 - Yes, you may be able to grow dwarf cherry tomato plants, but they need room, so they may need to be the only thing you grow in your garden at that time. Pruning will need to be a priority to make sure the plant is small enough to stay under the grow light.
 - Do the **tomato** plants need a stake to support the plant?
 - While they may not need a stake in the hydroponic garden, if you decide to transplant them to a pot, they will need a cage or stakes as they grow.
- Can you grow from seeds of **green vegetables like cucumbers and peppers**?
 - These are small gardens, so you don't want plants that grow really large. Cucumbers need a lot of space, but small peppers may grow well. We'll discuss this more in our Kitchen Scrap Gardening series!
- Can we grow parsley, cilantro, and other **herbs**?
 - Yes, leafy herbs such as parsley and cilantro will work well in our gardens. Woody herbs like rosemary would not grow well.
- Can we grow **garlic**?
 - No, root vegetables and things like garlic or onions don't work well growing in the pod environment.
- Can we grow **wildflowers**?
 - You can try, especially small flowers like chamomile may work well! Many flowers require more "breathing space," though, so you want to make sure they are well-spaced (for example, Ruthe had two chamomile plants on opposite ends of the garden, and nothing in between them).
- Would we be able to plant **perennial flowers** as well as annuals?
 - You can use the hydroponic garden as a starter and then transfer them into soil! You can't grow anything with a bulb in a hydroponic garden, but you can definitely start other flowers in your hydroponic garden and transfer them to soil when they get larger.
- Can I grow **jasmine** in my hydroponics garden and transplant it to a flowerpot to live as a house plant?

- Jasmine may work in the hydroponic system, but we don't have experience trying it. Keep the purpose of the system and the amount of available space in mind when planting new plants!
- Can **vegetables and flowers** be grown at the same time?
 - Yes, you can grow both at the same time! You can keep it on the vegetable light setting (full-spectrum light).
- How can I do **rotational planting of lettuce** in the hydroponic garden? Is it different from doing so in soil?
 - Approach it similarly to how you would in a soil garden, but keep in mind that, with the nutrients, hydroponic gardens will be more consistently the same, and your lettuce will likely grow fast. Track the progress in a garden journal so you can plan for future cycles better once you have experienced one or two complete cycles, from planting to going to seed.

Garden Maintenance and Troubleshooting

- The instructions advise cleaning the water reservoir every few weeks, with a **complete water change**. Is it safe to lay the rooted seedlings aside on a counter while this is done?
 - You can pick up the tray and place the entire tray on a cookie tray or Tupperware, so the pods stay upright. The pods help protect the seeds/sprouts while they are out of the basin, and they will be fine out of the water while you clean the basin. We also have an instructional video on how to clean the gardens available on our Resource Page.
- Does the light automatically reset itself if there is a **power outage**?
 - No, you'll just have to turn the light on again to restart the 16 hours on, 8 hours off cycle. You'll also have to turn it on again whenever you unplug the garden to clean it.
- The **spinach seeds** included in our kit **didn't grow**. They seem to have gotten moldy. What might have gone wrong, and how can I fix it?
 - Sometimes some seeds don't grow, due to age or having a bad batch of seeds. Spinach can be particularly temperamental. Spinach usually takes 2 weeks to sprout, but it may take 3-4 weeks. If you see mold show up, remove the seeds and the pod, so the mold won't get to the other plants.
- I used 4 seeds per pod as directed, but only 30% of the pods germinated. Can I **reseed the empty pods**?
 - If the pods are free of mold, feel free to plant new seeds in them! If they have mold, don't reuse them.
- Is **mold** a concern in these gardens?

- The plant food helps fight against mold. Also, placing your stickers over the pods (as detailed in the instructions) and black caps over the empty holes helps prevent mold.
- Should I be concerned if I see something that looks like **mold** at the bottom of my seedlings? Does this mean they are too damp and if so, is there a way to control this?
 - That is the seed “jump-starting” - you may see a little film while the seeds are soaking. That is totally fine!
- What is the best way to monitor **pH levels**?
 - Using the correct amount of the included nutrients will help balance pH. There is a video about adding nutrients available on our Resource Page.
- What can I do to keep the **gnats, baby flies or ants** away? Do we need to worry about bugs?
 - The hydroponic garden helps prevent a lot of the pests that normally are attracted to moist soil. The oxygen in the water, as well as the lack of soil, should naturally keep these bugs from being attracted to the garden.
- **How long** will these plants continue to grow in the hydroponic garden?
 - When your leafy greens become less full and take up less space, or leaf growth slows, you’ll know that they might be reaching the end of their life span, and it would be a good idea to take out those plants. You will get a few months of growth out of your leafy greens, and a bit longer out of your herbs, as they do not grow “out” as much.
 - You may also notice your greens getting more “spindly”, which will indicate you need to start over again! The taste will also turn a little more bitter – you can even do a quick taste test when harvesting, instead of waiting to notice a taste change when putting your greens in a salad!
 - Keep in mind that you should be keeping your plants at a similar height, so they can all receive the correct amount of light as you adjust the height of the light. So, if you take out some plants but have other tall ones, you might want to wait to regrow them.
- Can you clean and **re-use the seed pods** or do you need buy more pods and start fresh with new seeds?
 - When you want to plant new seeds, you’ll need to use a new pod. Links to buy replacement materials can be found on our general FAQ Sheet on our Resource Page.
- Is there any **noise** within the water container? I plugged the cord in correctly on the outside but there's no noise.
 - The water pump in our garden is very quiet, but it is still working, even if you can't hear it. You can lift the lid slightly to see the water by the pump move to be assured that the water pump is on.

- I've had seeds for years – **do they expire?**
 - Seeds do not expire, but they do lose potency. We recommend soaking it in a little water for a few hours (or up to 2 days). If it sprouts, it is still good! If it doesn't sprout in that time, it is likely "expired."
- I have to go **out of town** for three weeks. Is there a way to keep the hydroponic garden going, other than giving it to a neighbor?
 - If you are going out of town at the beginning of your growing process, that is totally fine. The seeds will be slow to germinate and sprout, and won't use too much water during those three weeks, so you won't have to worry too much about adding more water while you are away. If you are going out of town for multiple weeks later in the growing/pruning/harvesting process, you may need someone to check on your garden once during your trip, to make sure there is enough water in the basin and enough space between the plants and the light.
- The **water level has not gone down** in over a month. Is something wrong?
 - When the plants are first growing, they will not soak up much water at all, so this is normal! Once the plants are larger and you are pruning them for continued growth, you will notice the water level going down more.
- Is it normal to have **water levels decrease quickly**, by about 1L every 4-5 days?
 - Yes, this can be normal! As the plants get larger, they may take in more water. As long as your plants are looking healthy (and there are no visible water leaks around your garden!), this is just caused by the plants taking in more water at different stages in their life cycles!
- Can **roots** be **trimmed**?
 - Yes, the roots can handle a little damage, and once you see that the water in your garden is full of roots, you may want to trim the roots or transplant some of your plants and start anew.
- Any tips on **tangled roots** and how to disentangle them?
 - If you can still pull up the plant to check on it without an issue, you can let it be. If the roots are really tangled, you can gently massage them apart under running water (with a low water pressure). The seeds we sent were also for fairly sturdy plants, so some damage to the roots is okay. You don't want to cut roots too much, though!
- When the plant **light goes off**, the plant starts to look **wilted**, but it perks up when the light is on. Should I be concerned?
 - This is most likely not a concern! Check that your garden has enough water, but otherwise, this is natural.
- There are smaller **leaves** under the plant that are **dying** and some of the bigger leaves are **browning** on the edge. What should I do?

- It is completely normal for the lower leaves to wilt, as they are receiving less light. This may be a sign to harvest your leaves earlier.
- If the top leaves are turning brown, make sure there is a 4-inch gap between your top leaves and the light, so the light doesn't burn the leaves. You may also want to trim more leaves off to encourage what is left to grow better.
- What to do if one of your plants **grows too tall** for the garden?
 - Our hydroponic gardens require consistent pruning to keep the plants at a manageable size. If your plant grows to the height of the light at its tallest setting, it is definitely time to harvest!
- My arugula has 2 types of leaves. Some are smooth, which is what I see in the store, and the others have **little spikes** on them. Are they both edible?
 - Yes, both are edible! If you don't like the look or feel of the spikes, you can discard those. The spikes are just a sign that the plant has been growing for a while.
- I notice that some of the salad **leaves** in my hydroponic system have started to **turn yellowish white**. Is there something that I need to do to stop this on my salad leaves?
 - Check how close your light is to your plants. You want them to be about a hand's width from the light. If they're too close to the light, you'll want to prune your plants. Being too close to the light burns and bleaches the leaves.
- Are these plants growing as hydroponics **safe for cats**?
 - Among the seeds included with your kit, an excess of consuming mint can potentially be bad for cats.
 - Among other common indoor plants, snake plants (a.k.a. mother-in-law's tongue), lilies, and lavender are particularly bad for cats.
- I was cleaning my hydroponic garden and noticed that the **filter** needed **cleaning**. What should I do about that?
 - When cleaning the hydroponic garden, take a look at the filter and remove any roots, and clean the filter (sponge-like material). Don't use soap, but either blow through the filter or run clean water through it.
- I use **filtered water** for my garden. When I went to clean the tank, I noticed the water was not scummy. Could this be because of the filtered water?
 - It could be! We have experience using tap water for our gardens, and it is not frequently scummy. The residue we have is typically just a little ring around the side of the garden, caused by the nutrients, which is very easy to clean out! It is still smart to change the water and clean your garden regularly, even if the water looks clean.

Additional Supplies

- Where do you get **pods** for seeds?
 - The pods come with the garden kit! You can purchase additional ones if you need them later here: <https://a.co/d/eliK2uS>. We have more replacement supplies linked in our general FAQ document on the Resource Page.
- Where do we get **additional seeds**?
 - Our suggested sources for seeds are <https://www.seedneeds.com>, <https://survivalgardenseeds.com>, or <https://www.gethsemanegardens.com>
 - Here's a link to the Chicago Public Library seed libraries, with a list of branches that have them available! [Seed Libraries at Select Chicago Public Library Branches | Chicago Public Library](#)
- Does the **plant food** expire?
 - It is good for about five months after it is opened – if you're using it right away, you'll use it up before it expires.
- Could I use **aquatic plants chemicals** with hydroponics?
 - Hydroponics typically have their own pre-made nutrient mixes. Some nutrient mixes are more geared towards fruited plants vs. herbs or leafy greens. You would want to investigate what your specific plants need.

Preserving and Using Your Harvest

- Have you ever used a **gas oven to dry herbs** overnight, after it has been heated?
 - Heat helps break down the oils that are in the plant, so you want to be careful to not cook the plant, as you'll lose some of the health benefits in the natural oils. You can use the oven, but the best way to dry our herbs and preserve those natural oils is natural air drying.
- When **pruning** and using our herbs and leafy greens, should we use a knife, scissors, or our hands?
 - You can use scissors, pruning shears, or pinching to harvest or prune the plants. When you use a knife, the cut becomes messier than using a supply that pinches the material, so the pinching action is important. We recommend trimming on a diagonal if possible.
 - When you're using dried herbs, keep the plant cutting whole for as long as possible to preserve the oils. When you're ready to cook with them, you can chop up the plants, but crunching to break up the herbs releases more of those oils and fragrances.
- Should you **wash your plants** before using them?

- It's a great idea to rinse those herbs and leafy greens before using them or storing them in the fridge, as dust can collect on indoor gardens. Cold water can work well to help your harvested plants perk up if they are beginning to wilt.
- If you harvest a lot of one plant all at once, how can you **keep it fresh** for longer?
 - You can put some of the leaves with their ends in a cup of water in the fridge, or you can put them in a dampened paper towel in a Ziploc bag in the fridge, which will keep them fresh and usable for a few days longer.
- Should we dry the herbs **on or off the stem**?
 - We recommend storing herbs on the stem, as breaking the plant releases some of the natural oils that are full of nutrients.
- How can you make **body lotion** using herbs or flowers?
 - A simple recipe for body lotion includes a 1:1 ratio of shea butter and oil, such as coconut oil, argon oil, or sweet almond oil. To include herbs or flowers in your lotion, place the herbs or flowers in an airtight jar and cover with oil. Leave for about two weeks and then strain the oil to use in your lotion.

Mint

- What is the difference between mint and peppermint?
 - Peppermint is one of the specific plants under the umbrella of mint in general – it is just one specific type of mint, which we have included in our kits.
- Can you explain how to dry mint without it molding?
 - When you prune your plant, you can dry them by hanging them upside down, covered with a brown paper bag to prevent dust or dirt from gathering while it is drying. You want to let the mint dry until the stems or leaves break when bent before storing them in an airtight container. If any moisture remains when they are moved to the container, that is what can cause mold.
 - You can also use a dehydrator or oven, but you'll lose some of the health benefits in the natural oils. The best way to dry our herbs and preserve those natural oils is natural air drying.
- After the mint plant develops in the kit, is it ideal to replant a whole one outside where the mosquitos linger?
 - Yes! If multiple seeds sprout, you can transplant one sprout outside. Once your mint plant starts to grow in your hydroponic garden, you can also transplant some of the mint to a cup of water, let it grow there, and transplant it to soil. We recommend keeping it in soil in a pot even outdoors, since it spreads aggressively if planted in the ground.

- Is mint safe around pets?
 - Mint is a strong plant – the leaves and oils shouldn't be consumed by small children or pets.
- Will mint spread in our hydroponic garden (like it does invasively when planted in the ground)?
 - It is contained in the small space of the pod, though root "shooters" will escape from the pod – you can cut those back!

Dandelion

- Can dandelion tea be sun brewed?
 - Yes!
- Does dandelion have vitamin K2?
 - Yes!
- Do we need to boil the roots in water?
 - For the tea, you'll want to boil them. For adding them to a salad, you just need to wash them, no need to boil the water when cleaning.
- Are there are any restrictions on dandelion tea?
 - One cup per day is probably enough, since dandelion is so loaded with the nutrients it contains. If you're on diuretic medication, consult your doctor, and you likely will not want to drink dandelion tea.
- Are all those nutrients in the dandelion in all parts of the plant, or are some only in the flower, leaves, or roots?
 - All parts are loaded with those benefits. The roots probably have the most, but you still get a lot from the leaves and flower petals, so use all the parts!
- Could we use the white dandelions after the yellow flowers go away for tea?
 - The white part is actually the seeds – you don't want to eat those or make tea with them, but you can save them to plant more dandelions!
- For dandelion tea, do you use the leaf or the flower, and do you dry it first?
 - You can make tea using fresh or dried leaves. When drying leaves, make sure you dry them as whole as possible, to keep all the natural oils in the plant to preserve the benefits, and store them in an airtight container.
- Is this a different type of dandelion than the ones you see served on restaurant salads, for example?
 - There are some dandelions specifically grown for salads (red dandelions), but they are essentially the same plants as the dandelions we are growing, with the same benefits.
- What seasoning or other flavors do you recommend with dandelions?

- Dandelions have a stronger flavor, so a stronger-flavored dressing, like a balsamic glaze, or adding fruit, like strawberries, helps to cut that flavor. You may also enjoy adding honey, goat cheese, and nuts.
- For dandelion tea, you can add in honey or ginger root to change the flavor.

Basil

- When should we harvest basil?
 - You should harvest the plants when the leaves look the size that you would normally buy in the grocery store! Basil is good at any size, but about the size of a coin or larger is a great size.
- Is basil good to put in salads? If so, how many leaves should we use to not overpower everything else?
 - This is totally up to your personal preference, but I like cutting up just a few leaves in a salad so you can get small bursts of flavor in more bites (rather than full leaves).
- Can you eat too much basil?
 - Always consult with your medical team and eat in moderation!
- What should you do if your basil plant grows flowers?
 - You want to pinch or cut those flowers off, to encourage the basil leaves to grow more.

Garden Journaling

- What information is the most useful to track in your journal?
 - You want to note what you're planting and when you're planting it. Tracking the growth window (how long it takes to sprout) and harvest window (when do you harvest) and comparing to the timelines you expected can help you catch problems and troubleshoot. It is also helpful to journal if you notice any discoloration or pests (how many pests, or how many yellowed leaves, for example), so you can know if a problem is getting worse, or how different treatments impact your plants.