



Redwood Barn Nursery

1607 Fifth Street Davis, California

Top 12 Easy Edibles

Last month's column (Top 12 Fruits for Flavor, January 27) sparked great feedback. Folks shared their own favorites and gently chided me for various omissions. It's difficult to narrow it down that way, paring away so many great choices to just one for each month. Then one reader gave me another challenge: "Which edibles are the easiest?"

This question is way too broad. There are lots of edible plants that are very easy, even carefree. For example, prickly pear cactus grows without any attention at all. My mother often made *nopales* from the tender new growth, and loved the fruit for jam, but it's not for everyone. Things like pineapple guavas and kumquats are certainly easy to grow. But those are kind of an acquired taste.

So I gave the question some parameters: things that are easy to grow that many people would actually eat, that aren't messy or fussy. I do assume you're willing to water them, though some on this list are quite drought tolerant.

Once again, sorted roughly by season of harvest, here are my picks for easiest edibles.

1. Meyer lemon

This longtime garden favorite begins ripening in winter, but the fruit hangs on the tree for many months and can actually be harvested year around. The compact growth habit makes it easy to pick the fruit. Find a sunny location, water deeply and infrequently. Pruning isn't needed except for size control or to shape. Meyer lemon can even be grown for many years in a large container such as a half wine barrel, though it will need more frequent watering and fertilizing.

2. Navel orange

As with the lemon, orange trees like deep, infrequent watering. An established navel orange tree may only need water once a month, so long as you give it a long soaking each time. Prune to keep the fruit in picking range. I harvest navel oranges from January through March, picking as we need them.

3. Strawberries

Plant young strawberry plants here and there around your garden every few weeks. Each bloom produces fruit in just a few weeks, and they will continue to flower into early summer. To keep the bugs away from the fruit, get it up off the ground: a layer of straw or medium bark will protect the berries from slugs and sowbugs.

4. Radishes

Every kid should plant radish seeds at least once, just to build confidence about gardening. Sow the seeds in loose soil in full sun, in the garden or in a large pot, and keep them watered. They sprout in a few days, develop quickly, and can be



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harvested in just a few weeks. Even the sprouts and greens are edible. Radishes have mildest flavor in the cool season.

5. Santa Rosa plum

Plums have been described as the beginner's fruit. Hardly any pests, not difficult to prune, and adaptable to a range of soil conditions, a plum tree will produce almost no matter what. They can even produce in some shade.

Santa Rosa is a prolific variety that is not only self-fruitful, but provides cross-pollination for most other plums and pluots. This is probably the most familiar plum variety, widely planted for decades in California. It has a tart skin and sweet flesh. They do ripen fast, so prepare to process them. Other plums are easy to grow; just check to see if they need another variety for cross-pollination.

6. Juliet tomato

I always want beginning gardeners to plant at least one small-fruited variety of tomato, because they ripen quickly and tend to be prolific. Juliet, an All-American Award winning introduction in 1999, has proven reliable everywhere. Huge quantities of tasty pear-shaped fruit, great for salads but meaty enough to cook for sauce or salsa. Freezes well whole.

7. Gypsy pepper

Bell peppers can take a long time to develop here. You plant them out in May and don't usually start harvesting until late July. But Gypsy, a longish light-green sweet pepper, sets early and abundantly and can be picked at any stage of development. It's thin-walled, great for salads. And it ripens faster than most other peppers, turning red just a few weeks after reaching full size. Consistently reliable yields, year after year.

8. Sweet basil

Planted in spring and summer in a sunny garden bed or large pot, basil seeds sprout in a few days, and you can harvest in just a few weeks. Basil loves our hot, dry climate. There are several varieties that vary mainly in how pungent they are and how big they grow.

Basil tries to flower within a couple of months of planting. It's best to keep cutting it back to get flushes of tender leaves, or you can sow or transplant more every few weeks to have a supply all the way up until frost. Then dry or freeze some for winter use.

9. Blackjack fig

On my Top 12 for Flavor list I had the White Genoa fig for its juicy sweetness. But all varieties of figs love sun, tolerate drought, and produce with almost no effort on your part. What makes Blackjack easier is that it's a naturally dwarf tree: no pruning needed, easy to reach the fruit. Blackjack fruit are just like Black Mission variety, the familiar back yard fig in California. In our area figs produce a light crop in late spring, and a heavy crop in late summer.



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10. Pomegranates

Plant, water until established, wait a couple of years, and you'll get fruit. Simple as that. Very heat and drought tolerant, and no pruning needed. Now all you have to do is figure out how to eat them. Pomegranate juice is very good for you.

11. Swiss chard

There's really only one vegetable that we can plant and harvest year-around. Swiss chard can be grown as a perennial; just cut it back every so often if the leaves are getting tough. Or plant out new seedlings in spring, summer, fall, or winter. The leaves are most tender in the cool seasons. Colorful stems are great in soups and stews. It's really good for you, too.

12. Kitchen herbs!

Ok, this is kind of cheating, since I already mentioned basil. But it is frost tender, so we only grow it in the warm months. Most of the other herbs we use are perennials or shrubs.

They love heat, tolerate drought, and can even grow adequately in light shade. If you have a big container, crowd them together and just trim or thin as you use them. A mixed planting of culinary herbs can last for years.

Here's a simple garden project you can do with any age gardener.

- Get a large container: an oak half-barrel (28" diameter) is ideal, but anything about that size will do. Make sure it has drain holes. If not, drill 5 1/2-inch diameter holes in the bottom.
- Put the barrel in the sunniest location you have.
- Fill it with good quality potting soil that contains some organic fertilizer. A planter of that size requires about 3 cubic feet of soil.
- Plant 8 to 10 small plants of your favorite cooking herbs: rosemary, sage, oregano, marjoram, chives, tarragon, mint, and more, are all easy and long-lived garden plants.
- If you do want to add basil, use the dwarf types.
- Add some flowers for fun: pansies and violas in the cool season, marigolds or nasturtiums in warm season. Sweet alyssum any time.
- Water thoroughly. A barrel with that much soil needs to be watered about once a week. It can be added to an existing sprinkler system by means of a simple drip line running from a nearby sprinkler head.
- You can begin pinching herbs for recipes right away. Trim any plants that try to overgrow their neighbors. Otherwise, in a couple of years you'll have a half-barrel full of just rosemary and mint!

Want to learn more? I'll be teaching a class on Easy Edibles at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) on Tuesday, March 8. Check out <https://extension.ucdavis.edu/areas-study/osher-lifelong-learning-institute> for more information and registration details.



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The most popular herb, sweet basil, grows great in the Valley. Plant when the weather warms up, from seed or young transplants, and pinch off flower heads as they develop to keep the plants producing. Or just plant new ones every few weeks. You can harvest basil almost until frost.



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Juliet is one of several small-fruited tomatoes that produce readily for gardeners at all skill levels. Small-fruited types don't take as long from flower to fruit, and keep producing clusters of fruit all season long. Cherry tomatoes such as Sungold and Sweet



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100 are equally easy to grow. Give 'em room; they're vines that want to climb several feet.



An All-America Award-winning vegetable from the early 1980's, Gypsy pepper has stood the test of time. It sets and yields quickly and continues all season. And the peppers ripen to red much faster than conventional bell peppers.



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Probably the easiest vegetable to grow, Swiss chard is planted in all seasons here in the Valley. Leaves can be used like cabbage for stuffing, or simply sautéed as greens. The colorful stems hold up well in soups and stews. Chard gets a little tough in summer, so just cut it back to get some new growth to flush out. Or plant new seedlings in fall.



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An easy project for any gardening skill level! An oak barrel planted with rosemary, oregano, thyme, sage, and parsley, and decorated with English daisies and violas. Trim the young plants as you use the herbs in cooking, and just pop in new ones now and then. Once a week watering in sun or light shade should be fine.