# LOW BUDGET GARDEN IDEAS

## GETTING THE MOST GREENERY WITH A LITTLE $ GREEN.
## MAINTAINING THIS GARDEN COSTS ABOUT $200 A YEAR.

## COMPOST

**MAKE YOUR OWN ENRICHING SOIL ADDITIVES USING GRASS CLIPPINGS, LEAVES, AND HOUSEHOLD FOOD WASTE TO AUGMENT REGULAR SOIL.**


## NATURAL WOOD CHIPS

**FREE FROM TREE SERVICES**
**NO FOUL ROTTEN SMELL**
**NO COLORANTS ADDED**
**NOT MADE FROM RECYCLED PALLETS**
**HOLD MOISTURE AND BLOCK WEEDS**
**WILL NOT FLOAT AWAY IN RAIN**



## START FROM SEEDS

**SEEDLINGS FROM 1 PACKET CAN COST 10X LESS THAN A POTTED PLANT AND GROW 50X MORE PLANTS.**
**INFINITE VARIETIES & HEIRLOOMS**

**SAVE YOUR OWN SEEDS TO GROW AGAIN NEXT YEAR.**

## NATIVE PLANTS, NO LAWN

**NO EXPENSIVE FERTILIZERS**
**NO TOXIC CHEMICALS IN SOIL**
**LITTLE TO NO WATERING**
**NO WEEKLY MOWING**
**ATTRACT BIRDS AND POLLINATORS**
**SELF-SEEDING & PERENNIAL PLANTS**


# COST SAVING IDEAS

# Low Budget Gardening Ideas

People cite the cost of maintaining a garden as a limitation to their ability to afford a garden. There are some input costs with one-time expenditures such as supports, trellises, tools, and other accessories essential to gardening. However, once these initial investments are made, gardening can become a low-cost hobby or lifestyle rather than an overwhelming, recurring annual expense.

Sustainable growing methods are inclined towards affordability, without costly, chemically enhanced soils and fertilizers. If there is one mantra that I like to preach repeatedly: Avoid the big box store garden departments and focus on natural methods that work. Just because it is sold in a store does not mean you need it. People fall for the convenience of pre-fertilized soils, toxic fertilizers, weed control products, and develop an addiction to these products. When the packaged solutions fail, people think they can't succeed at gardening and give up. Garden centers do not exist to make you a better gardener but to make money selling you what you think you need.

These concepts can be broken down into many separate lessons, but I will provide a concise summary of some of my best cost saving, environmentally friendly ideas.

**Composting**

In recent years, composting has become a hot topic, with the city providing composting sites by Metra stations. But the best place to begin is in your home. Separating fruit/vegetable scraps, peels and waste from regular trash can be integrated at home, just like separating paper, plastic and aluminum for recycling, which we all do. I keep a small trash bag in the kitchen just for this purpose. Empty it more frequently to avoid smells and fruit files. Having a dedicated 30-40 gallon compost bin in the backyard means you can introduce organic material to the garden to enrich the soil using things you already have. Corn husks, banana peels, watermelon rinds, moldy grapes, mushy mangoes, even pet hair – it can all be composted. Meat, bones, diseased plants, pet waste and bread products do not belong in a compost pile. They can attract undesirable critters to visit and feast on it.

Many people assume composting is a spring-fall activity and not suitable for winter. On the contrary, winter composting can be just as productive. The freeze/thaw cycle allows materials to break down quickly by spring.

I maintain 3 compost bins, each with at least 30 gallon capacity:

1. **Grass clippings**, which are collected throughout the growing season. Grass breaks down quickly and nutrients from it can be added to the garden during the summer.

2. **Household food waste** collected from November till end of February. The contents from that bin are added to my garden in April as I prepare my beds for the growing season.

3. **Household food waste** collected from early March and emptied in November after the frost, when the garden beds are cleared of vegetation for winter. It continues to break down over winter, with leaf cover on top. The sheer volume of decaying matter and nutrients augments the soil in strategic areas.

The advantage of adding compost to soil is to have nutrients coming from the decomposing ingredients rather than a dependency on pricy enriched soils and fertilizers that could be harmful to the natural biodiversity of your soil.

**Wood Chips**

Pathways and borders around garden beds can be lined with natural wood chips instead of bagged mulch. The mulch in bags has colorants added and possibly other contaminants, especially from less reputable sources where it could have been derived from shredded wooden pallets or lumber scraps with chemicals leaching into the soil as they break down. The bagged mulch can become fermented and reek horribly, while natural chips have the fragrance of freshly cut trees. And absolutely no rubber “forever mulch” which will suffocate and poison your soil.

Most tree cutting services provide “arborist” wood chips as a free service, since they dispose of chipped trees at their expense. I use Davey Tree, since they are frequently present in the Park Ridge community and deliver a pile in my driveway when they do work nearby. For most homeowners, 2-3 cubic yards (1 cubic yard = 27 $ft^3$) is more than enough. It can be shared with neighbors too. A typical bag of mulch sells for $4-$6 per 2 cubic foot bag. For a cubic yard, you would need about 14 bags, so if you see a pallet of mulch bags stacked in a driveway, you are looking at $70-90 per cubic yard, depending on the source and type of mulch. For my walking paths and bed areas, that would be around $200 a year worth of bagged mulch but is free with natural wood chips.

Wood chips alongside a garden bed provide their own benefits. The idea behind wood chips is to allow nature and the soil microbial life to thrive in a no-till garden. Gardeners who use wood chips build fertility each year, adding more chips annually to encourage natural processes. Chips won't acidify your soil, and they are not toxic. Wood chips are valued by gardeners as a source of carbon and organic matter. Wood chips decompose over time and need to be replenished each year. That decomposed organic matter gets incorporated into the soil, improving soil structure and aeration, moisture, nutrient holding capacity, and fertility. Wood chips also suppress weed growth and keep the paths clear of undesirable plants popping up. Spread them around trees or bushes too. Around vegetable or flower beds, it rains, water gets trapped underneath the chips. This gives it time to slowly absorb into the roots slowly as the soil dries around the chips, prolonging soil moisture, which means less watering. They're also great for pathways and between raised beds or filling low-lying areas on paths where it gets muddy after rain. Wood chips improve soil moisture levels and keep soil cool under hot summer sun.

**Starting Plants from Seeds**

While convenient, buying flats full of ready-to-plant flowers and vegetables is a costly endeavor, easily running up hundreds of dollars for premium plants in 4" pots or perennials in gallon pots to fill a garden. Continuing with my argument opposing store bought solutions, seeds can be a force multiplier in a garden, cost-wise.

Garden catalogs sell an immense variety of seeds, offering many things that cannot be bought as plants in container cells, such as specific heirlooms or rarities that can't be found in produce aisles.

The multiplier effect is obvious. A packet of seeds can contain 50, 100, 300 or even thousands of seeds if buying in bulk. A cell of containers can be dozens of plants in a flat at a few dollars each, adding up very quickly. Potted perennials in gallon sized pots start around $10 and go up from there. Seed packets sell for under $5 in most cases and their budgetary impact is immediate. Perennials from seed can grow too, though it will take 2 seasons for them to bloom.

Starting some plants indoors like delicate annuals or long season vegetables like tomatoes and peppers is a significant savings in itself.

For my ROI (return on investment) study, a mature potted tomato plant can cost $15-20 at a store and may come with blossom end rot or blight disease directly from the store. Buying organically raised tomatoes at a farmers market or store costs about $4/pound. Assuming your pricy, potted tomato grows well, you will need to produce 4-5 pounds of tomatoes from that plant just to break even on the plant purchase, not counting the soil and additives

you may need. At that price, you might as well buy ripe tomatoes from the store and not bother planting at all. A seed packet of tomatoes can have 20 or more seeds for under $5. Saving your own seeds is free. It means you can grow numerous plants at a tiny fraction of the price. Transplant those outside in early May and at just 2-3 pounds harvest per plant, that initial expenditure can be recovered manyfold in abundance of tomatoes.

Some plants like lettuce, beans, carrots, squash, cucumbers and many flower types can be direct sown at the correct time. Again, the output from a single seed packet can greatly outperform a vanload of container cell flats worth hundreds. It also reduces waste since you do not need to dispose of all the flimsy, black plastic containers afterwards.

**Native Plants / Less Lawn**

Lawns provide a pretty green surface, but it is expensive to maintain a monoculture of perfectly green grass. Yet most people consider lush green lawns around their homes as adding value to their property. A native garden provides a rich environment for bees, butterflies and other beneficial insects. It can also be pleasant to see and not look like an overgrown weed lot.

While I have not abolished grass completely, I have greatly limited its presence, preferring a natural wildflower garden that occupies nearly half of what used to be grass when I bought my home over 20 years ago. The remaining grass is not treated with synthetic fertilizers and weed control chemicals. That is yet another recurring cost. The popular “Step 1-4 fertilizers” is sold in bundles of 4 bags and costs around $350 for a full growing season.

Replacing portions of the lawn with native plants provides an attraction for pollinators and birds. It requires no fertilizers or other chemicals to maintain. Native plants also do not need all the water that grass does, even when it gets dry.

I started my native growing area with little more than a pound of wildflower seed mix, which cost me about $40. I chose to begin with all annuals since they would all bloom in year one and create an immediate visual impact. I added perennials from seedlings and transplants later. Once the flowers bloom, they drop their seeds and return the following year without any active sowing on my part, except to scatter some seeds to fill a few bare spots. Self-seeding, less water usage, less mowing, and no chemical fertilizers provides a recurring annual savings compared to the price of lawn care. My bi-weekly 1 hour mowing routine shrunk to just 20 minutes. In the span of the approximate 6-month grass growing season from April to October, that amounts to 20 hours less work for me and my mower. Depending on the amount of lawn, it can also eliminate the need to hire a professional lawn service and all the savings that comes with it.