

The Healthy Gardener

How a backyard garden can keep your eyes and body healthy

Dr. Laurie Capogna, OD and Dr. Barbara Pelletier, OD

Planting a backyard garden is a great way to complement a healthy lifestyle. We've known for years that if we include a variety of fruits and vegetables in our diet we can help to keep our bodies healthy and prevent chronic disease. In more recent years, the concern over environmental toxins has caused a rapid increase in the number of people that are growing their own fruits and vegetables in their backyard. Fruit and vegetables contain the highest amount of nutrients when they are first harvested. If you include freshly picked fruit and vegetables from your backyard garden into your diet you are ensuring that you are eating the food when it is the most nutritious.

Studies say...

Recent scientific studies say that antioxidants help to prevent chronic disease and keep our bodies healthy.¹ Brightly coloured fruits and vegetables are loaded with the antioxidants that will help us to maintain health and vitality. In addition to promoting overall general health, eating a variety of fresh fruit and vegetables will help to keep your eyes healthy and prevent eye disease. In fact, research has shown a direct link between the consumption of certain antioxidants and a decreased risk of chronic eye disease such as age-related macular degeneration in certain people.²

Eye-Foods are a group of foods that contain an abundant amount of nutrients that help to prevent eye disease and maintain eye health. Many Eye-Foods are fruits and vegetables that can be grown in your backyard. Leafy green vegetables such as kale, spinach, and dark green lettuce varieties are examples of Eye-Foods that are loaded with nutrients that not only prevent eye disease but also help to maintain overall health.

The Health Booster Garden

Tips to ensure that the fruits and vegetables in your garden will provide you with a balance of disease fighting nutrients.

- Create a garden with a variety of colours.
- Enjoy your fruits and vegetables as soon as possible after having picked them. This is the time that they are the most nutritious.

- Plant early and late varieties of vegetables if they are available to ensure that you have the best variety throughout the growing season.
- Include different herbs in your garden. Herbs are a great way to add healthy flavour to salads and fresh vegetable dishes. Herbs also contain disease-fighting properties.

Health Benefits of Fruits and Vegetables

Plant all or some of the following fruit and vegetables in your garden and reap the healthy rewards that they each provide.

Peppers

Green, red, orange, yellow and hot peppers: Each pepper variety has its own combination of vitamins so it is important to include all coloured peppers into your garden. All peppers are very high in vitamin C. In fact peppers contain more vitamin C than oranges and other citrus fruit.

Tomatoes

Tomatoes are a great addition to any garden and there are so many varieties to choose from including early varieties, late varieties, grape tomatoes and special heirloom tomatoes. Tomatoes are best enjoyed both raw and cooked to get the most benefit from their nutrients. Tomatoes contain many antioxidants, however, they are best known for their high amount of the cancer and disease fighting lycopene. Studies have shown that lycopene can decrease the risk of prostate cancer in men.³ Cooking tomatoes increases the amount of lycopene available to the body.

Green onions, yellow onions, leeks

Onions and leeks not only add great flavour to fresh summer dishes but they are also high in disease fighting compounds. Green onions also contain a significant amount of vitamin C.

Cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli and brussel sprouts

These cruciferous vegetables are filled with compounds that can help to prevent cancer.⁴ They are also excellent sources of vitamin C. Broccoli and brussel sprouts contain a high amount of lutein, a nutrient that is important in the prevention of eye disease.

Peas

Peas are a great addition to any garden. They are fun to enjoy directly out of the pod on an early summer day. Peas are high in vitamin C, beta-carotene and lutein.

Carrots, sweet potato, pumpkin, butternut squash

These orange root vegetables are loaded with beta-carotene. Canada's Food Guide recommends including one orange vegetable per day in your diet.⁵ Planting a variety of orange vegetables in your garden will allow you to enjoy the different flavors these vegetables provide. Orange vegetables make great soups, which can be frozen and enjoyed later in the year.

Leafy green vegetables

Leafy green vegetables are one of the most important additions to any backyard garden. They contain high amounts of almost all antioxidants, including lutein and are an important part of any nutrition plan that is aimed to maintain health and fight disease.

Strawberries

Strawberries become ripe early in the summer when other fruits and vegetables are still in their growing stage. This makes them a special treat and eating fresh strawberries often evokes memories of warm summer days in people. Strawberries are high in vitamin C and phytochemicals, nutrients that can help to fight chronic disease.

Melons

Cantaloupe and watermelon are easily grown in your backyard. Cantaloupe is a great source of beta-carotene and watermelon is high in lycopene.

References:

¹McDermott, J. 2000. Antioxidant nutrients: Current dietary recommendations and research update. *J Am Pharm Assoc.* 40 (6): 785-799.

²Age-Related Eye Disease Study Research Group (AREDS). 2001. A randomized, placebo-controlled, clinical trial of high-dose supplementation with vitamins C and E, beta carotene, and zinc for age-related macular degeneration and vision loss. *Arch ophthalmol* 199: 1417-1436.

³Kaia M. Everson, Pharm.D.; Cydney E. McQueen, Pharm.D. American Journal of Health-System Pharmacy. 2004;61(15) © 2004 American Society of Health-System Pharmacists

⁴Beliveau, R., and D. Gingras. 2006. *Cooking with foods that fight cancer*. Toronto, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart.

⁵Health Canada. Canada's Food Guide. 2007. <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/index-eng.php>.

USDA Agricultural Research Service. Nutrient data laboratory.
<http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/foodcomp/>