



# Edible Essex

# Simple ways to grow your own - in the UK's driest county


Edible Essex is delighted to work with Essex & Suffolk Water to produce this information leaflet - **for vegetable growers, both new and experienced, throughout Essex.**



***Demand for allotments is at an all-time high and there simply aren't enough plots on offer. But vegetables can easily be grown at home - you don't need a lot of space, or even a garden!***


## **GROWING VEGETABLES IN SMALL SPACES**

Nearly all vegetables can be grown in small spaces, containers, pots, window boxes or hanging baskets. Select dwarf varieties of beans, kale, spring cabbage, carrots and cauliflower.



Crops, such as French and runner beans and cucumbers, can be grown 'vertically' using trellises, cane wigwams, stakes and fences.

Use growing bags to cultivate tomatoes, peppers and other salad crops.



Herbs such as sage, rosemary and parsley are easy to grow and are much tastier fresh. Most herbs can thrive in tougher environments.

It's cheaper to raise plants from seed and this will offer you a wider choice of plant varieties.




Have seedlings of vegetables on standby, ready to plant as soon as your first crop is harvested.

Maximise space by 'intercropping' - growing fast and slow growing crops together. Faster growing plants (lettuce, radish and beetroot) will be harvested by the time the larger plants (potatoes and tomatoes) need the space to grow.

Use the 'cut-and-come-again' system for leafy vegetables. Picking the young leaves when you need them and then cutting the plant back will enable you to harvest several times. This method saves space, time and money.

Leafy greens, legumes and most root crops can cope in partial shade, while spinach, broccoli, rhubarb, cabbage and kale can do well even in shade as long as there is some reflected light.



## ESSEX

**Essex is the driest county in the UK, receiving on average less than 600 mm of rain a year, which is two thirds of the average for England and Wales. Only half the water supplied in the Essex area is sourced from within the county.**

Essex & Suffolk Water abstracts from the rivers Chelmer, Blackwater, and Stour in Essex, the River Waveney in Suffolk and the River Bure in Norfolk, to provide drinking water to around 1.8 million customers in the south east of England.

In a dry year, up to one third of the required water is derived from the Ely Ouse to Essex Transfer Scheme (EOETS), which transfers water from Denver in Norfolk, via pipelines and pumping stations to the River Stour and River Blackwater in Essex.

Low average rainfall and rising demand for water creates significant challenges to fulfill the needs of a growing population. Essex & Suffolk Water believe it is important to work in partnership with customers in their efforts to reduce waste, recycle and generally look after this precious resource.



## SIMPLE WATER-SAVING TECHNIQUES FOR YOUR VEGETABLE GARDEN

### IMPROVING SOIL STRUCTURE

Improving your soil structure is essential to keep plant roots moist, especially in the hottest and driest areas of your garden. Before planting, dig in some organic matter, and with clay soils, a layer of sharp grit as well.

### IRRIGATION SYSTEMS

Sprinklers and overhead systems are very wasteful of water, whereas low-volume systems, such as seep hoses and drip irrigation systems, deliver water directly to the plant roots.

### MULCHES

Mulches suppress weeds, keep the soil cool and reduce evaporation and soil compaction. The best weed suppressors are cocoa shell, finely chipped bark, plastic sheeting and grass clippings.

### RAINWATER AND 'GREY WATER'

Water butts are ideal for collecting rainwater from the roof of your house, garage, greenhouse or shed. Plants prefer rain water and it's free!

Grey water (water used for washing and bathing) can sometimes be re-used in the garden, but not on edible crops.





## COPING WITH DROUGHT CONDITIONS

- Water plants in the evening so that water is retained in the soil for longer.
- Water the base of the plant – **not the leaves (as this could cause disease).**
- Group vegetables by their water needs.
- Large containers and raised beds need less frequent watering than small pots.
- Place small pots into larger containers or group them together to help humidity and slow down evaporation. Ceramic or metal pots are less porous than terracotta, although lining every pot with plastic and topping them with mulch will assist in water retention.
- Sandwich a layer of polythene between the moss and liner of a hanging basket to stop the water draining through.
- If watering becomes a problem, thin out crops to twice the normal spacing, or, with crops like leaf lettuce chard and perpetual spinach, cut them back.
- **Don't water fruit trees and bushes.** With soft fruit, harvest the crop as early as possible and carry on pruning at the same time to reduce water stress for the rest of the summer.
- Keep on top of weeds as these will compete with your veg for valuable water supply!

## VEGETABLES REQUIRING LESS WATER

Some vegetables, once established, can be more tolerant of dry conditions than others:

- **Asparagus, beetroot** and other **root vegetables** are the most drought-tolerant.
- **Leeks** need to be 'puddled in' when planting in a hole, but from then on they will send down strong roots in search of moisture. Earthing up for blanching, by drawing soil around stems, helps preserve some moisture.
- **Onions** will tolerate low rainfall; **broad beans, French beans** and **sweet corn** will tolerate drier conditions, though yields may decrease.
- **Rhubarb** will survive on low moisture (but this may affect size of crop).
- **Marrows** and **courgettes** need watering only once the fruit starts to swell.
- **Leafy crops**, together with **cauliflower, calabrese, salad onions, peas, potatoes, runner beans** and **tomatoes** need the most water. **Spinach beet** is the best leafy crop for drought conditions.





## FEEDING AND PROTECTING YOUR EDIBLES

**Plants need three main elements to grow: nitrogen, potassium, and phosphorus. Many chemical fertilisers contain much more of these elements than the crops actually require. Excess minerals are washed away by rain and irrigation and can ultimately find their way into our water sources. The improper use of fertilisers also harms the environment.**

Essex & Suffolk Water help farmers in their river catchment areas to follow best practice on the use of pesticides and fertilisers. Improving the river quality at source reduces the reliance on their treatment works to remove unwanted substances. This approach is environmentally sustainable and more cost effective for their customers.

**Food grown without artificial chemicals is another way to help reduce the problem. Healthy soil is the key to healthy plants!**

### Homemade Compost

Most garden debris can be recycled into compost, which then provides plant foods and improves soil structure. Kitchen waste, including peelings, eggshells, bread, cereals, and pasta can be composted together with garden waste. Good compost will take about six months to produce if it's turned regularly.

### Manures

Horse, cow and poultry manures are very rich in nutrients but must be well composted before use. Make sure it comes from an organic or free-range source. Fresh poultry manure makes an excellent activator for a compost heap. Dried and processed poultry manure products can be bought from garden centres.

### Seaweed

Fresh seaweed has been used for centuries as a soil improver and plant feed. It enables crops to develop a higher tolerance for extremes of temperature such as ice and prolonged periods of sunshine. It also deters slugs!

Dried and liquidised forms are available from garden centres.

## KEEPING PESTS AND DISEASES AWAY

- Keep your soil healthy, make best use of water, remove weeds before seed dispersal, maintain plant hygiene and use clean tools.
- Avoid planting out crops at times where insect activity is at a critical stage – i.e. egg laying.
- Use physical barriers such as screens and nets, to deter pests.
- Create traps or remove insects by hand, such as caterpillars and slugs.
- Companion plants can help each other in terms of providing nutrients in the soil, offering protection from wind or sun and also, by attracting beneficial pests or acting as a decoy for harmful ones.
- Crop rotation will ensure that diseases and conditions are not allowed to build up in the soil.
- Ladybirds eat aphids. Frogs, hedgehogs and birds all eat slugs and snails. It is best to avoid using chemical controls if possible as they kill both friend and foe!



# USEFUL INFORMATION AND LINKS

## Savings for Essex & Suffolk Water Customers

Essex & Suffolk Water offer their customers the opportunity to request trigger hose guns, water storing crystals and water saving kits, **free of charge** [www.eswater.co.uk/usingwaterwisely.aspx](http://www.eswater.co.uk/usingwaterwisely.aspx).

Essex & Suffolk Water work with Straight Plc to offer their customers water butt kits at a discounted price. [www.esw.savewater.co.uk](http://www.esw.savewater.co.uk)

### Rural Community Council of Essex

[www.essexrcc.org.uk](http://www.essexrcc.org.uk)

### National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners

[www.nsalg.org.uk](http://www.nsalg.org.uk)

### Allotment Vegetable Growing

[www.allotment.org.uk](http://www.allotment.org.uk)

### Seed to Plate

[www.seedtoplate.co.uk](http://www.seedtoplate.co.uk)

### Garden Organic

[www.gardenorganic.org.uk](http://www.gardenorganic.org.uk)

### Essex & Suffolk Water

[www.eswater.co.uk](http://www.eswater.co.uk)

### Royal Horticultural Society

[www.rhs.org.uk](http://www.rhs.org.uk)

### Allotments UK

[www.allotments-uk.com](http://www.allotments-uk.com)

### BBC Dig In grow your own campaign

[www.bbc.co.uk/gardening/digin](http://www.bbc.co.uk/gardening/digin)

### Landshare

[www.landshare.net](http://www.landshare.net)

## About Edible Essex

Edible Essex is a three year project, funded through the Big Lottery's Local Food Programme, supported by Essex County Council and managed by the Rural Community Council of Essex.

Edible Essex aims to increase the number of people growing, sourcing and using local food in their everyday lives by:

- offering practical support to help set up or renovate allotment sites and orchards across the county.
- organising free training sessions and events, and
- disseminating information.

### Edible Essex Project Manager

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*The Rural Community Council of Essex is an independent charity helping people and communities throughout rural Essex create a sustainable future.*

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