



## ABOUT CAN YOU DIG IT

*Can You Dig It?* is a three part program designed to connect youth and teens to gardening, farming, and our food system. *Can You Dig It?* includes three activities: Seed Starting, Planting & Growing, and Harvesting & Seed Collection

This educational resource is part of Grow: Johnson County's youth empowerment programming that aims to reconnect youth with gardens, farms, ecosystems, and to create spaces for cooperative learning.

Please adapt and make appropriate adjustments and additions for your community's needs.

To learn more about the program, **visit our website at [www.growjohnsoncounty.org/canyoudigit](http://www.growjohnsoncounty.org/canyoudigit)**

## LESSON A | YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

### Lesson A- You Are What You Eat

**Essential Question:** How do I know when a vegetable in my garden is ready for harvest?

#### Background and Starting Where You Are:

a.) Harvesting food straight from the garden is a powerful act. Experiencing the flavors of seasonal locally grown food is one of the joys of growing a garden. This is an opportunity to see what crops are in season and ready for picking.

b.) Each vegetable type and variety will have different ripening times.

c.) Let the seed packet or online search be your guide. Find the "Days to Maturity" to know approximately when your crops will be harvested. Or use photos of the type of fruits/ veg you're growing to know that it looks like when ripe.

#### Materials:

Harvest basket or container  
Scissors or pruners  
Harvest knife

#### Vocabulary: *(visit our website for definitions)*

harvest  
ripe  
bolt  
food system

**Preparation for Education:**

- a.) Know what you're looking for in terms of ripe and ready to harvest crops.
    - 1.) Refer to the growing information on the seed packet or online- the "Days to Maturity"
    - 2.) Know what your crops look like in terms of color and size when ripe.
  - b.) Do regular garden walks and maintenance in the garden to see the progression of ripening crops.
  - c.) You want to harvest crops at the proper maturity level so they are at peak flavor and nutrition.
    - 1.) Ripe time varies with certain vegetables. Ex. Tomatoes can be left on the vine to ripen or when partially ripened and harvested and placed on the counter to mature. Other crops like watermelon and winter squash are not ready for harvest until fully developed.
  - d.) Trampling through the foliage when plants are wet can spread disease. Harvest crops when they are dry.
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**Activity:**

- a.) Check the garden to determine what is ripe and ready for harvest.
- b.) Handle plants with care and start harvesting!
- c.) Taste the harvest! **This is the best part!**

**Guiding Question For Youth:**

What are some ways the food you pick in the garden is different from the food you buy in the store? Can you notice difference in color, texture, taste, size and diversity?

Brainstorm ways a local food system (like growing in a garden) and a conventional food system (most food from the grocery store) adds to or detracts to the health of people and the environment.

Talk about access to healthy food. How do factors like wealth, race, and geography make it easier or harder for people to access the food they need and want?

**Tips for Success:**

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*Tip! If your crops begin to bolt, and send up a flower stalk in order to set seed, consider leaving them in the garden for seed collection.*

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*Tip! If ripe crops are not easily removed from the plant, cut them with a knife or pruners.*

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*Tip! Most crops can be harvested multiple times.*

Think of leaves as solar panels. If you harvest the entire head, or all the leaves, you've removed their marvelous capacity to photosynthesize sugars from the sun, allowing them to grow. Keep some of the leaves and come back and harvest again.

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*Tip! Before harvest or eating fresh from the garden remember to follow safe hand-washing and produce washing practices.*

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**For additional information, refer to these additional resources included in the *Can You Dig It* packet:**

Resource I : Vegetable Planting and Harvesting Tips on page 469 in the *The Growing Classroom Guide*.

**Why is this a helpful resource?** There are planting, harvesting, and cooking tips for commonly planted garden vegetables.

## LESSON B | SEED SAVING

### Lesson B- Seed Saving

**Essential Question:** How do I harvest seeds from my garden to plant the next season?

#### Background and Starting Where You Are:

Seed-saving serves as a way to preserve biodiversity and connect us to the whole life-cycle of the plants we're growing. Plus, you'll have seeds for next season!

Seeds are produced and mature in different ways and places in different crops. For example, bean seeds mature within their pods.

Lettuce seeds ripen in the flowers' capsules. Some seeds mature within fleshy fruits. (tomatoes, squash, cucumbers).

The ideal time for gathering seeds is different from crop to crop. One way to ensure success is to start with easy vegetables, herbs, and flowers to collect seeds from.

#### Materials:

Paper bags  
Pruners or knife

#### Vocabulary: *(visit our website for definitions)*

hybrid  
open pollinated  
heirloom  
variety  
self pollination  
cross pollination  
off type

#### Preparation for Education:

a.) Know Your Plants!

Find out your plants specific name (genus and species). This will tell you if your plants are hybrid or open pollinated varieties. Choose open pollinated seeds rather than hybrids.

Hybrids, which are created by crossing plants of two different varieties, usually do not produce offspring with the same traits as the parent plant. Listed as F1 or F2 plants.

Seeds saved from open pollinated varieties will produce plants identical to the parent, this includes heirloom plants.

#### Activity:

a.) Step One: Select the plants you want to save seed from.

*Tip: Choose only the most vigorous plants with the best-tasting fruit as parents for the next year's crop. Do not save seed from weak or off-type plants.*

b.) Step Two: Find your open pollinated crops of the plants chosen! These will be easiest to save. Peas, beans and lettuce are great options for beginning seed savers since they are easy to gather.

c.) Step Three: Collect seeds in a bag and label them: Label your seeds with the crop type, variety name, and any useful notes about growing conditions like sun requirements or height, width, and spacing considerations. **Don't forget to add the date you collected the seed!**

d.) Step Four: Try a more complicated seed to save like tomatoes: Allow fruits to fully ripen and then scoop out the seeds, with the gel surrounding them, before you eat or cook them!

- 1.) Put the seeds (with gel) in a glass jar with some water.
- 2.) Stir the mixture twice a day. The mixture will ferment and the seeds should sink to the bottom within 5 days.
- 3.) Pour off the liquid, rinse seeds, spread them out on a paper towel to fully dry.

e.) Step Five: Store in a cool dark place: Seeds are happiest when they are stored in a cool, dark, and dry place. Once properly dried, seeds can also be sealed in airtight containers and stored in the refrigerator or freezer for several years.

### Tips for Success:

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*Tip! Using a knife or scissors to harvest certain crops minimizes damage to the plants when picking.*

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*Tip! Peas, beans, lettuce, and tomatoes are great options for beginning seed savers since they are big and easy to gather.*

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These crops have flowers that are self pollinating and seeds require little or no treatment before storage.

Plants with separate male and female flowers, like corn and vine crops, may cross-pollinate. It is difficult to keep the seed strain pure. Cross-pollination will not affect the quality of the current crop, seeds from such a cross will grow into vines with fruit unlike that of the parent plant. This often results in inferior flavor and other characteristics.

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### For additional information, refer to these additional resources included in the *Can You Dig It* packet:

Resource J : Tips for Cooking with Kids, page 483 in *The Growing Classroom*.

**Why is this a helpful resource?** It provides useful information on safe food handling, basic knife safety, and age appropriate cooking tasks.

Resource K : Check out the Healthy Eating, Nutrients, and Food Systems & Consumerism sections of the *Growing Classroom* workbook for lesson inspiration for youth K-6th grades.

**Why is this a helpful resource?** These sections tie together the importance of nutrition and how the food system impacts our society.

Resource L : IDALS *Fruit and Vegetable Harvest Calendar*

**Why is this a helpful resource?** Provides information about when produce in Iowa is in season.

Resource M : *Kids Gardening Seed Saving Chart*

**Why is this a helpful resource?** It provides guidance on seed saving for commonly planted crops.

**Ideas for Youth Action:**

Think about having a monthly meal where youth get the chance to gather, cook, and share food together. This can be a wonderful way to forge strong connections.

Meet the people that grow your food by supporting local farmers at a farmers market.

**Change the menu** by requesting more local and organic options at your schools and restaurants.

**Minimize your waste!** We produce huge amounts of waste, including packaging and kitchen and garden waste. Recycling, composting, and waste reduction are key to minimizing our impact on the earth.



*Want to learn more? We're available to help! Interested in expanding this lesson into a field trip at our farm? Reach out to us at our website [growjohnsoncounty.org/canyoudigit](http://growjohnsoncounty.org/canyoudigit) and fill out the interest form.*