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Gardening during quarantine

Carol Stuttard, special to The Times

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Carol Stuttard is a Maricopa County Master Gardener, Horticultural Instructor at Desert Botanical Gardens and professor of horticulture at Mesa Community College. She also teaches gardening classes at the Fountain Hills Community Center. As a Fountain Hills resident, she reached out to share her knowledge with her neighbors looking to get in some gardening while hanging around the house.

As people remain in self-quarantine due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it seems like everyone is getting into gardening. There is actually a huge benefit to gardening. As well as providing your family with fresh homegrown food, gardens can also provide a place for experiencing nature, which is proven to benefit mental health and emotional well-being. And merely looking at gardens can reduce stress, blood pressure and muscle tension, which is certainly greatly needed right now.

So now, more than ever, perhaps it is time to just go out there and plant something! Of course, while the rest of the country is just getting into their gardening stride, we here in the Low Desert are just thinking about what's coming – summer heat.

Gardening in Arizona can present some unique challenges, especially in growing vegetables and as we enter our warm season. You might think to yourself, what can I do now? But there is still time to plant a few peppers, tomatoes and basil. Nurturing and caring for these few plants will really help if you are stuck at home plus, of course, there will be something delicious to eat.

So how can you do that, if you don't even have a vegetable plot? It is actually quite simple - plant an instant garden.

Buy a large bag of good-quality garden soil or even potting mix. When choosing your plants to buy, select the biggest, healthiest ones you can find. This is no time for choosing the wimpy small plants, they won't have time to grow enough to give you any crops and then you'll just get discouraged.

Find a spot in your yard or patio that gets morning sun (vegetables need 6-8 hours of sun) but afternoon shade; this is vital here or your plants will cook! Lay the bag of soil down onto the ground or wherever you have selected. Punch drainage holes in the bottom of the bag. With the other flat side uppermost, cut away the top of the bag leaving roughly 4" around the edge of the bag. Make sure the soil is moist. Plant directly into the bag.

You may cover the top of the bag with straw or mulch to help keep it cool and retain moisture (as well as hide the plastic). Water your plants and off you go. As the weather warms even more, it is helpful to provide a shade structure over your vegetables. If you already have a vegetable garden, but haven't planted anything

yet, the same plant selection and cultivation advice applies. Even if all you plant is basil – which loves our summer heat – or a pepper plant, tending and caring for your plants and just getting outside for a little while will help during these stressful times.

Happy gardening !

For more local gardening advice, check out the Maricopa County Master Gardener website at extension.arizona.edu/maricopamg.