

Talking with your landlord about gardening? Here are some “talking points!”

Structuring a Garden Agreement

With a well-structured agreement is in everyone’s best interest. The key to pitching such an arrangement is to put yourself in the landlord's shoes. The landlord may say to himself, "I can't charge the next tenant more because you put in six tomato plants. So, why should I finance your desire to have tomatoes when I can't recoup the cost in higher rent?"

However, a smart landlord will also look at the problem this way: "Heck, \$200 on a raised bed for you to grow tomato plants isn't much if it's going to give me a happy tenant who takes good care of my property." The expense of keeping you content is small next to the cost (paint, landscaping, advertising and possibly lost rental income) of losing you and finding someone to take your place.

The following tips can help you reassure your landlord and build a persuasive argument:

- 1. Establish your credentials.** You say you're a great gardener/landscaper/handyman. But how can your landlord know? Figure out how to demonstrate that you know what you're doing. Perhaps you have a former landlord who benefited from your work and can be a reference. Or maybe you have photos.
- 2. Explain it as an investment.** If your work truly is remarkable, lay out the case to the landlord that it will not only improve the property visually, it also may make it possible to charge a higher rent next time. "The backyard," you might say, "is really kind of bleak. When I'm done with it, it'll be so nice that you can use a photo of it in the for-rent ad."
- 3. Keep the standards high.** Especially if you are asking the landlord to reimburse you for materials, anticipate that she'll want a high standard of workmanship. Figure out how your work will meet that standard. Envision the project from start to finish. Think of all the ways in which a professional landscaper would put in a garden.

4. Put the details down. Make an agreement -- and write it down -- that lays out specifics: The garden bed you will install, for example, will be constructed of cedar boards and be 4'x8'x 1'. It will be located in the southeast corner of the backyard, close to the water spigot. It will be filled with compost and planted with tomato plants. This way, the landlord knows exactly what to expect and you know what you need to deliver.

5. Build in a "review and approval" stage. Give the landlord a chance to inspect at certain points, which lets you get buy-in and head off conflict later over clashing expectations.

6. Make a garden for the years. You may love those colorful annuals that fill the nurseries each season, but they'll be dead and gone in a few months, so why should your landlord pay for those? Invest the landlord's money, instead, in perennials that will fill out as time goes on and add to the attractiveness of the place.

7. Educate yourself. Learn enough about gardening to figure out which plants will thrive easily in your area (Plug your ZIP code into the National Garden Association's [interactive map](#) to find your zone.). Learn the soil and light conditions of your site -- are your garden beds in sun? Shade? Partial shade? Is the soil heavy clay? Sandy? Consult with a garden store to learn what amendments the soil needs and select plants suited to your garden's conditions. Read [Mother Earth News' advice](#) for beginning vegetable gardeners and [Martha Stewart's Gardening 101](#) has the basics on flowers and ornamentals.

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