

Plants to grow in a Keyhole Garden

You can grow most things in a Keyhole Garden. But in African countries they are generally used to supplement diets with extra nutrients and build near a kitchen to allow easy access to healthy food. The following plants are commonly grown in east African keyhole beds.

A few pointers: plants with deep roots needing lots of feeding should be planted near the centre; place your sun loving plants facing south and the keyhole path north; add herbs near the rocks to bind the soil; rotate your crops and add fresh soil and compost over time.

Spinach - Having some crops that you can go to, pick and keep coming back to, are very handy, allowing families to have a steady supply of nourishing food. Spinach and chard are good examples of this type of crop and are often grown by people suffering from HIV/AIDS for their nutritional value.

'African spinach' Amaranthus - In the UK this plant is seen as an eye-catching flower, however in Uganda they are planted for their nutritional value - some even say it is a super food, packed full of nutrients. It is treated much like spinach, but as the plants grow very tall there are more leaves to pick and use (the young leaves are the tastiest). Only use organic fertilisers on this crop.

Gourds - These can come as edible and non-edible plants and they are used for all sort of things once dried, as their shell becomes very light, yet hard as wood. They are commonly grown in Uganda and are turned into water carriers, kitchen utensils, tools and musical instruments.

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Tithonia (Mexican sunflower) - These beautiful flowers can be found in some areas of Uganda growing up to about 2 metres high. They are rich in nitrogen and phosphorous and can help sweetcorn cobs grow by adding these into the soil when composted. Being a bushy plant, they can also be used on the border of crops to soak up heavy rains, and can also be added to animal feed or used as a green manure.

Chillies - Some families grow chillies to give food an extra kick or to make sauces, but it is more common that they would grow them to make organic pesticides. Mixed with African Marigolds, tomato and comfrey leaves, chillies make a good pesticide that can be diluted and sprayed onto plants.

Sweetcorn (Maize) - In Uganda sweetcorn is a staple food, which is either eaten roasted or the cobs are dried out in the sun before being pounded with a pestle and mortar to make flour. Some people also use a grinding stone or take it to a mill where a machine grinds the sweetcorn kernels. This makes 'Maize meal', which looks a bit like porridge.

Climbing beans - Many families grow beans on their land in Uganda, just like many families in the UK. Although they can be picked and put straight into a meal, they are often hung up by the stalks and dried, sometimes smoked – allowing them to be stored as dried beans so that they can be kept for longer.

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Tips for growing in the UK

Gourds – these can be planted alongside the sweetcorn and beans to add ground cover to prevent weeds. They need warmth and a lot of water once the fruits start to form and the growing tip should be pinched once there are about five fruits on the vine. A support can be made for the fruits or they can be set off the ground with straw.

Spinach - fairly simple to grow, spinach should be sown in batches to allow you to get a crop from them throughout the growing season.

Tithonia (Mexican sunflower) – these need full sun, will grow up to 2 metres in height and should attract butterflies. They should be planted on the north side of your plot so they do not shade the other plants and will need to be kept under control. They could be planted in pots to check their growth and brought on in a warm greenhouse.

Chillies – these are easy to grow once they are established. Grow on a warm windowsill and then transfer when frost has passed – they do not like to get cold! Plant the chillies in well draining soil or in pots and move to a bigger pot if you want a bigger plant.

Sweetcorn (Maize) – this should be grown indoors to get it started off earlier than the beans and gourds. They like nitrogen and phosphorous and like to have their roots in shade and should be planted in a square formation to aid pollination.

Climbing beans – beans do not like the cold and so can be started off slightly later indoors and only put out when frost has passed. They can be planted about 18cm away from the sweetcorn and trained to climb up them, providing shade, adding nitrogen into the soil and repelling pests from the sweetcorn.

Please try to grow all of these crops organically using peat free soil, preferably using compost that you have made and adding some well

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rotted manure if you can get hold of some. Try only to use either
bought organic fertiliser and pesticides or make your own.

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