This is not a sales pitch for sustainability. If you were not already sold, you would not be here. This is a how to without breaking your back or the bank. There are a few rules that make it easier and they can save you a lot of money:

1. Plan big but start small.
2. No invasives!
3. Compost, mulch
4. Orchard
5. Chickens
6. Start seeds indoors in winter
7. Maximize perennials
8. Build soil
9. Do not walk in beds

1. Plan big but start small.

The number one reason that so many novice gardeners only last one year is weeds. A huge garden requires a lot of time and work to weed. A tiny garden can be tended in minutes and it will teach you that which you need to know to do twice as much next year. Mulch will help suppress weeds and make them easier to pull. Use the bulk of the time the first year planning, learning, making compost and fencing. This is an ideal time to plant and fence a few fruit and nut trees. A three foot fence will keep deer out of a small area. A twelve foot fence will not keep deer out of a large area.

2. No invasives!

A weed is anything growing where you do not want it. A rose is a weed in a cornfield. English ivy, Bermuda grass and kudzu are all examples. They are weeds because they are so good at spreading from where they are permissible to where you do not want them. Plant aggressive spreaders only if you first have a method in place to control their spread. The easiest way control them is to not permit them on your land.

3. Compost, Mulch

The most important thing to remember about sustainability is that you must feed the soil with organics. Chemical fertilizer, herbicides and pesticides are not sustainable. More is required each year at a higher cost to maintain production. They destroy the soil and poison the plants, our earth and water. Organics in the form of compost and mulch, on the other hand, strengthen the soil and the plants. When combined with crop rotation less is required each year.

4. Orchard

Master gardener training taught me that fruit trees are high maintenance. They require fertilizing, pruning and heavy doses of chemical insecticides. If you like to eat beautiful poison fruit this is true. If you want fruit that is healthful for you let your compost and your chickens tend the orchard weeding, feeding, cleaning up cast fruit and bug patrol. You will still have to prune, harvest fruit and collect the eggs.
5. Chickens

Housing and feeding chickens is expensive unless you deduct the cost of the tiller, fuel, insecticide, fertilizer, meat and eggs. Chickens eat anything smaller and slower than chickens. You can build a chicken moat around your garden or better yet give them the orchard and fence them out of some beds when it is time to plant. Let them back in when the plants are large enough to survive them until flowering and again after harvest.

6. Start seeds indoors in winter

You may be able to buy sets and bedding plants each year but your choices may be limited and the quality poor. When you start your own from last years saved seeds you have the plants you want on your schedule at a greatly reduced cost. Saving seeds is recommended of all your favorite varieties, and a good way to ensure the availability of heirloom seeds.

7. Maximize perennials

Annuals may give you more color sooner but perennials are a “one time and it's good for years”. There are many plants that will do this for you but they are only a bargain if your family will eat them. You need to give them the best soil possible to start and top dress with compost and mulch each year. Do not forget the orchard. Self seeding annuals are second best but you have to let them go to seed and not mulch in the fall. On some this lessens the quality of the fruit.

8. Build soil

Feed the soil and prevent erosion. Feed it organics at any stage of decomposition. Raw is okay as mulch on the surface as long as it does not mat and is not too high (hot) in any one nutrient or too acid or alkaline. Finished compost is better, but partially digested is best. It better feeds the soil animals that are beneficial to your soil and plants.

9. Do not walk in beds

Do not do anything to compact the soil. Stepping stones and narrow beds help. Tilling, cultivating and walking in the beds not only compact the soil, it can cause hard-pan. This is a layer that in impenetrable to water and most roots. One of the few plants that can grow on hard-pan is moss.

So much for rules. I told you this was a five year plan.

Year one: Read, study, plan, start a small kitchen garden, start composting, plant a few fruit and or nut trees and fence.

Year two: Learn from last years mistakes, more fence, make beds and fill with compost, introduce chickens, enlarge the kitchen garden and plant a small veggie garden, feed garden, make more compost. Mulch.

Year three: Keep learning. Fence chickens out of old beds in orchard and plant. Build more beds, enlarge orchard, enlarge garden, feed garden, compost and mulch.

Year four: Keep learning. Improve soil, correct last years problems. Enjoy orchard fruit. Compost and mulch.

Year five: Feed soil, mulch and tweak the gardens.

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