

Lessons From A First Time Urban Outdoor Grow - How Not To Do It!

(Warning: May result in addiction and obsessive behaviour!)

I'd been thinking about growing my own cannabis for a while, but a rented inner city bedsit with a shared garden didn't seem like the right place. That all changed with quarantine, which I was enjoying, until the realisation that my Green supply would be affected. Who'd of thought dealers would follow lockdown rules!?

A genuine fear of running dry during the pandemic induced holiday from 'real life' turned classic stoner thoughts into action. I wanted to be as high as fuck to really enjoy the accelerated, panic driven collapse of modern civilisation.

A couple of years ago I'd been given a ['Waste Deep Auto'](#) from [Heavyweight Seeds](#) and had a bunch of possibly Swazi landrace seeds from my old man's emergency medicine stash, found while clearing out his cottage.

Growing indoors was a non starter, partially because of space, the cost of lights and assorted equipment, but mostly because of my partners objections.



The beginning of the 2020 urban outdoor container grow

During a conversation with the downstairs neighbour, about growing vegetables in the variety of weedy containers in the garden, I asked whether he'd be comfortable with a special herb grow. He had no objections and thus began my first grow, which pretty much straight away ran into problems...

You Get What You Put In

This is true of most things in life, better expressed as Planning And Preparation Prevent Piss Poor Performance. It's always a good idea to have a basic understanding of anything you're trying to do for the first time.



But expecting it to be fairly easy, I hadn't really done much research nor planning. After all, you just needed seeds, soil, sunlight and water, right? Unfortunately it's a little more complicated than that, even for an outdoor grow which is still way simpler and cheaper than an indoor grow.

Part of the problem is that there is an overabundance of information out there, some of which is rubbish. Just like real life, there's some conflict between anecdotal evidence vs scientific evidence. And while science is far from perfect, it's considerably better than some bloke suggesting drinking bleach will cure everything! So where to begin? Reading this article will help with the basics and most of the top seed suppliers have more in depth [grow guides](#) available on their websites.

Choosing Your Beans



Given the range of choice available, the first problem you'll encounter is deciding what strain/s to grow. To some degree this will be guided by whether you prefer an Indica or Sativa effect, your grow situation and patience.

Your first concern should be finding out which strains are suitable for your climate. Most seed suppliers will provide rough guidance for the strains they sell. If you live in a fairly wet environment it's best to begin with a mould resistant strain to avoid the dreaded bud rot.

Auto-flowering strains are probably the best option for most urban outdoor grows. The inspired addition of [Cannabis Ruderalis](#) genes to classic Sativa/Indica hybrids has resulted in plants that automatically begin flowering after about 3/4 weeks and can be ready to harvest in 2/3 months*. Another advantage is that most Auto strains rarely grow more than 1m high with some as short as 60cm, making them easier to hide or disguise.

However, there are some drawbacks; Shorter growth times = less time to notice and sort out problems, some strains can be a little more 'finicky' than others and they'll probably produce less nuggets*.

(* Be aware that advertised times and bud weights are based on plants grown in perfect, controlled indoor conditions with maximised light and nutrients. You aren't going to get any of that, growing outdoors!)

Photoperiod plants take months before flowering, generally only ready for harvest 7/8months after sprouting. The longer growth period generally results in much bigger plants which produce far more buds, depending on a number of factors discussed later.

I definitely recommend spending more and buying feminised seeds to avoid the disappointment of nurturing a plant, only to discover it's male. If that's not an option, try and start out with a minimum of 4 seeds and hopefully you'll end up with at least two females.

Germination and Sprouting

Technically, germination and sprouting refer to the same process. However, for reasons that may become apparent shortly, I refer to germination as when the tap root first appears, and sprouting as when the first leaves break free.

There are a number of methods, all of which seem to work. Seeds simply need a moist, warm, dark environment. After drowning my second Auto, using the 'soak in a glass of water' method, my preference is for using about 2-4 squares of toilet roll, folding it in half, placing the folded paper in a small, flat sealable container, spraying the toilet paper with water, placing the seeds on it, then folding the paper over the seeds. Then sealing the container and placing it somewhere warm and dark. After 24-36 hours check it, respraying if needed. The seeds are ready for planting once you see about 3-4mm of tap root busting out. Be gentle when lifting them off the paper, to avoid breaking off the taproot. Place them into .5cm deep holes prepared in moist, but not wet soil. Cover them gently and give them a light spray of water. It can take anywhere from 3 days to a week before sprouting. Do not be tempted to disturb them to check on their progress. I did this with my first Auto seed because days after the



African seeds had sprouted, there was still no sign of it. I caused the growing taproot to break, killing it before it even saw the sun



Pot Size Counts

The pot size determines the size of the root system, which determines the size of your plants. Simply put, for most growers, the smaller the pot, the less bud you'll get.

Despite this being kinda obvious, I still managed to ignore it, along with the good advice not to experiment with your first grow. I deliberately planted one of the mystery african Sativa seeds into a 500ml repurposed yogurt pot, a result of stumbling across the 'solo cup grow challenge'. Another two got 1l pots, one in 2l and my 'Queen' got 3l. This partially was because I was dismissive of the pot size advice, partially because I intend experimenting with forced flowering, (discussed later) and largely because I didn't want to buy more pots or potting soil. Needless to say, I got nowhere near the amount of buds I was expecting.

Thankfully, by the time I managed to get an Autoflower to sprout, I'd got some bigger pots and decent potting soil. If you're growing Auto's you can get away with 10l to 15l pots, and for Photoperiod's a minimum of 20L is recommended, depending how high you want them to grow.

The Importance Of Soil And Water Ph Levels

This is the measure of how acidic or alkaline something is. Cannabis growing in soil needs a pH between 6-6.8 in order to access the full spectrum of nutrients. If it's too high/low the plant cannot take up the nutrients, even if they're abundant. Get a pH measurer, preferably electronic or the litmus paper tests. Measure your soil pH before planting.

The biggest mistake I made was failing to understand the importance of how both soil and water pH levels affect plants. As a result, killing one of my African girls and badly stressing the others as I scrambled to figure out what I thought were various nutrition issues. Most apparent nutrition issues are related to pH levels, and if you don't know what they are, or if they're too high/low, you'll struggle to grow plants that produce dank, sparkly buds.



Some funky leaf discolouration, a result of nutrient lockout caused by alkaline soil

You also need to measure your water, as it will influence the Ph of your soil. This was where I went wrong, the Ph of the water in my area was about 8.5, very quickly increasing the alkalinity of the soil. You can buy Ph adjusters but home remedies will work just as well. I used vinegar and lemon juice to successfully increase acidity and keep the soil Ph at about 6.5. Baking soda will increase alkalinity if your water is too acidic.



Soil

There are a number of ways of growing Ganja but soil is the simplest. It's not called weed for nothing, growing under all sorts of conditions across most of the world, but unless you're happy with ditch weed, it's worth ensuring the composition of your soil is reasonably good and nutritional.

I reused the potting soil in the containers I'd found in my garden, mixed with roughly twice the same amount with

new potting soil. You don't need to spend a lot, but it's worth looking for potting soil with a suitable pH level to begin with. The good brands will generally advertise both pH and NPK ratios on the bag. Even if you're planting straight into the ground, it's worth preparing the area with a 50/50 mix of potting soil and earth.

Nutrients And Growth

It's easy to get overwhelmed by the competing information on Cannabis nutrient requirements. There's an amazingly wide range of nutrients marketed to home growers, never mind the blogs advising on home made options. For your first grow keep it simple and get an understanding of the basics before diving into the nutrient rabbit hole.

The NPK ratio is a basic measure of the concentration of 3 key nutrients—Nitrogen, (for healthy leaf growth), Phosphorous, (for healthy roots) and potassium, (for healthy flowers).

Your plants will require differing levels of these depending on the stage of its life cycle.

Seedling - Growing in good potting soil means sufficient nutrients are available and as long as you don't overwater, and ensure the water pH is between 6-6.8, your plants will grow without needing supplements.



An indication of
Nitrogen deficiency

Vegetative and Pre-flower - These are the key growing times when your plant will grow tall and branch out, with healthy green leaves. If you're growing Auto's in 15l/20l pots, with good potting soil, you probably still won't need supplements for the first month or two, if at all. If you decide to experiment with smaller pots or grow Photoperiods larger pots, you'll definitely need supplements. Something I discovered shortly after resolving the Ph issues, further stressing my African plants. Liquid fertiliser is preferable as the nutrients are immediately available. Look for a NPK ratio similar to 7-5-5, or at least high Nitrogen and Phosphorous, and lower Potassium,

Your plants will tell you when they need feeding. Keep an eye out for any change in leaf colour or form, the first indication of [nutrient problems](#). Start off feeding half of the recommended dose, once a week, only increasing to the recommended dose if the leaves don't return to a healthy green form. Less is more, overfeeding will cause nutrient burn and potentially lock out some of those nutrients.



Early stage flower

Flowering - Once you notice the formation of buds, your plants will have stopped growing tall and bushy, focusing on growing the flowers. You should change the weekly feeds to a flower specific fertiliser, with a NPK ratio similar 3-10-10. I deeply regret not doing this, especially given all the stress I'd put my African plants through, and will definitely do so for my next grow.

It's worth noting that all fertilisers will affect your water and soil Ph, requiring occasional checks to ensure they remain in the 6-6.8 range.

Watering

Despite reading that the most common beginners mistake was over watering... I over-watered.

Wilting leaves are a sign of both under and over watering. If you err on the side of caution, it's easier to figure out. If the leaves remain wilted after watering, you've over watered. Overwatering can either 'drown' your plants, or cause root rot and eventual death.

As a rough guide, for sprouting and seedlings, keep the soil slightly damp to touch, with a combination of spray gun and the cut off tops of clear plastic bottles. This helps create the ideal warm, moist environment that young plants thrive in.



Over or under watered?

Once your plants have outgrown their mini-green houses, you can use the finger test. Stick your finger into the soil, up to the 2cd joint, if the soil feels dry then water, stopping as soon as you've noticed runoff at the bottom.



Late afternoon.
That back right corner is the
sunniest spot.

Sunlight

Sunlight is what enables plants to turn water, minerals and CO₂ into energy rich food for itself, via photosynthesis. Indoor growers will give their plants anything from 16-24h of light during the vegetative stage, contributing to optimum plant growth.

With an urban outdoor grow you'll be lucky if you get remotely close to that, although the less built up your grow area the better your chances. Ideally, your plants should get a minimum of 5h direct sunlight/day, with another 5h indirect sun during the summer months. Less than that and they'll still grow but just not very big. The more direct light they get during the vegetative stages the better they'll grow. I found I had to move my plants once or twice a day to maximise the hours of direct light my vaguely courtyard-like garden got. Unfortunately this caused some problems, with my neighbour becoming worried about them being noticed.

Reluctantly considering his concerns, The plants got less light, contributing to my surviving auto's longer than expected flowering time, low yield and somewhat airy buds.

Minimising Stress, Training Techniques And Companion Planting

You will be tempted by a range of suggested training techniques all guaranteed to improve the quality of plants' yield. Resist that temptation for your first grow, unless you like increasing complications and lowering your odds of a decent yield.

All of the them will stress your plant out, to varying degrees, with quite few of the advanced methods increasing the risk of damaging or killing your plants. At the very least, the stress will lower your bud yield, and harsh your garden buzz.



Heat stressed African Queen, kept
short and curled around the pot
using LST

All the guides suggest using your first grow to get to grips with the basics before experimenting. More good advice I ignored

Having said that, given the potential restrictions of an urban outdoor grow, if keeping your plants low is a priority then Low Stress Training (LST) is worth considering. This involves gently bending the non woody stems to grow around the edges of the pots, using plastic coated garden wire to hold them in place. This will help keep your plants lower than they might normally grow, making them easier to hide amongst other plants.

Having a mixture of companion plants is a great way to disguise your illegal aliens. As long as you avoid another of my mistakes; don't plant them in the same pot as your weed.



Autoflower, Tomato and Bean battling it out, a bad idea

I thought having a tomato and a bean plant growing with my auto would be ideal cover. But all it did was force all 3 to compete for nutrients, water and sunlight, leading to the bean plants early death. I'm sure this was a significant factor reducing the Auto's yield.

Forced Flowering

This is a common technique used by experienced growers to shorten the time from seed to harvest for photoperiods. More often used by indoor growers with complete control over light schedules, it involves giving the plant at least 16h of light for the first 3 weeks of its life, (or longer for bigger plants) before switching to a 12/12 light/dark schedule. This forces photoperiod plants to begin flowering much sooner than they normally would.

It has some advantages for urban outgrows when combined with using smaller pots and LST, in reducing the height of plants that could otherwise grow to 1 or 2 m. When the plants are about half the desired final height (they'll increase 50% to 100% in height during the pre flower stretch), find a way of keeping them in darkness for an initial 36h, then for 12h a day until harvest.



1l Pot African Sativa, LST and
Forced Flowering = 2g dry bud

This is more of a hassle than you'd think, requiring some means of ensuring total darkness, as even the slightest glimmer of light will prevent the forced flowering, or even worse, turn your girls into hermaphrodites. Both of which happened to my small pot experiments, until I resorted to using a rubbish bin with a weighted lid. Another drawback of doing this outdoors is that unless you're a skilled gardener, you're unlikely to get more than a couple of grams of dried bud per plant. The only reason I'd do this again is because I've still got a load of free African seeds to play with, I wouldn't bother if I was paying for seeds.

For first time or average skilled gardeners, most Auto flowers will be ready for harvest sooner, with higher yields. Thus making it pointless until you have the knowledge and skills to take on the challenge.

Keep A Grow Diary

This is something I didn't do and regretted it. I had marked some key dates on my Gcalander, but not all of them. Despite force flowering 3 Sativa's, I'm not sure how long they actually flowered for. I also didn't note what problems I had, with which plants, when and how I dealt with them. Nor did I note which plants had which of the different potting soils I used. All useful information for avoiding similar mistakes in future grows.

It also made writing this harder as I trawled my goldfish memory for details.



The Auto before harvesting

Managing Expectations

You will make mistakes, you will kill plants and that's ok. We learn through failure. I started out this grow with dreams of growing more than 100g of dank sticky crystal covered nuggets of bliss, from 4 african bag seeds planted in small pots, and 1 Auto seed.

After killing an Auto before it could sprout, drowning a second during a botched germination and stress killing one of the Africans plants, I readjusted my aim to a minimum of 24g of dry weight primo bud.



Badly Trimmed Sweet Seeds Fast Bud

I ended up being grateful for 10g off the [Sweet Seeds Fast Bud Auto](#), 1g off the solo cup girl, 2g off the 1l pot girl and 5g off the 3l pot girl. That's a total of 18g off 4 plants.

Despite a far, far lower yield than expected, I totally enjoyed the growing experience, both personal and plant wise. I'm already planning for next summer and look forward to a whole new bunch of mistakes to make with my accidental Autoflower x African Sativa hybrid seeds.

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