

YOUR FIRST 30 DAYS

# Countertop Hydroponics Starter Guide

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**What's inside:**

System comparison · Day-one setup checklist

Germination timeline · Growth milestones

Harvesting techniques · 5 mistakes to avoid

# Choosing Your System

Three brands come up in every recommendation thread. I've used all of them. Here's the short version.

SYSTEM	PODS	PRICE	BEST FOR
AeroGarden Harvest	6	~\$70	Beginners, herbs
AeroGarden Bounty	9	~\$180	Tall plants, tomatoes
iDOO 12-Pod	12	~\$80	Budget, more capacity
Click & Grow	3-9	~\$100+	Soil planter (not hydro)

## AeroGarden

The original. Reliable LEDs, good app, solid community for troubleshooting. The Harvest (6 pods, ~\$70) is the right starting point. The Bounty (~\$180) makes sense if you want to grow tomatoes or peppers — the extra height matters.

## iDOO

Budget-friendly with more pod capacity. The 12-pod system (~\$80) competes directly with the Bounty at less than half the price. Less community support, but the hardware holds up well. Built-in fan is a nice touch.

## Click & Grow

Not actually hydroponic — uses soil pods with wicking irrigation. Plants grow fine, but you are not learning hydroponics. If soil-free growing is the point, skip this one.

### WATCH OUT

Avoid combo kits that mix tomatoes and herbs in one unit. The tomatoes dominate everything else. Grow herbs together, fruiting plants separately.

### TIP

Start with the AeroGarden Harvest if you want simplicity, or the iDOO 12-pod if you want more room. Read detailed comparisons at [sproutflat.com/systems-guide/](https://sproutflat.com/systems-guide/)

# Day 1: Setup

Your system arrived. Here is what to do, step by step.

- 1 Fill the reservoir**

Use room-temperature tap water. Fill to the marked line. Cold water shocks seedling roots and slows germination. If your tap water is heavily chlorinated, let it sit in an open container for 24 hours first.
- 2 Add nutrients**

Use the included AeroGarden solution or your preferred hydroponic nutrients at half the recommended dose. More is not better — you can always add more later, but you cannot take it back.
- 3 Insert seed pods**

Press pods into the deck until they click. Cover every empty slot with the included caps. This is not optional — light reaching the water causes algae within days.
- 4 Set the light height**

Start with the light arm at its lowest position. The LED panel should stay 2–4 inches above the tallest plant at all times. You will raise it often during weeks 2–4.
- 5 Plug in and set timer**

Default AeroGarden settings (16 hours on, 8 off) work for herbs. If your system has no timer, plug into a \$5 outlet timer. Consistent light cycles matter more than total hours.
- 6 Place the unit wisely**

Kitchen counter away from windows is ideal. Direct sunlight heats the water and accelerates bolting. Keep away from stoves and heat sources. The pump makes noise — not ideal for bedrooms.

## TIP

Write today's date on a sticky note on the unit. Track nutrient additions and water changes from day one. A simple log saves you from guessing later.

# Week 1-2: Germination

Patience is the main skill here. Most herbs take 5-14 days to sprout. Some take longer. Here is a realistic timeline.

HERB	FIRST SPROUT	FULL GERMINATION
Basil	5-7 days	7-10 days
Lettuce	3-5 days	5-7 days
Mint	7-10 days	10-14 days
Cilantro	7-10 days	10-14 days
Chives	10-14 days	14-21 days
Parsley	14-18 days	18-28 days

## What to Expect

- Seeds swell and crack open within 2-5 days. You will not see anything above the pod surface yet. This is normal.
- First sprouts appear as tiny pale stems pushing through the sponge. Basil and lettuce are usually first.
- Parsley and chives are slow. Do not give up on them before 3 weeks. They are worth the wait.

## When to Worry

- No sprouts after 14 days for fast growers (basil, lettuce): the pod may be dead. Replace it.
- White fuzz on pods: usually harmless mycelium from the sponge, not mold. Wipe it off.
- Algae (green film) on pods or water: light is reaching the reservoir. Check pod caps and deck gaps.

### WATCH OUT

Do not poke at or dig into pods to check on seeds. You will damage the root structure. Just wait.

### TIP

Dome caps (included with most kits) maintain humidity during germination. Remove them the moment sprouts appear or they will cause leggy, weak stems.

# Week 2-3: Early Growth

Your seedlings are up. This is the most hands-on phase — a few minutes every other day keeps everything on track.

## Thinning (Do Not Skip This)

Most pods sprout 2-3 seedlings. Snip the weakest ones at the base with scissors, leaving only the strongest plant per pod. This feels wrong but it is the single most important thing you can do. Crowded seedlings compete for light and nutrients and all end up weak. One strong plant beats three struggling ones.

## First Nutrient Top-Up

Around week 2, check your water level — it drops faster than you expect once roots are established. Top up with fresh water and add nutrients according to your schedule. Do not let the reservoir run dry, even for a day. Dry roots recover slowly.

## pH Check

If you are using third-party nutrients, check pH now. You want 5.5-6.5. A \$15 pH pen is a worthwhile purchase. AeroGarden's own solution usually stays in range without adjustment.

## Raise the Light

Check every 2-3 days. If any plant is within 2 inches of the LED panel, raise it. Leaves that touch the lights will burn — you will see brown, dry patches. During this rapid growth phase, you may need to adjust the height twice a week.

## Water Change Schedule

Full water change every 4 weeks. Drain the reservoir, rinse it, refill with fresh water and nutrients. This prevents salt buildup and keeps roots healthy. Mark it on your calendar.

**TIP**  
Start tasting herbs now. Pinch a leaf off the top of basil or mint. Early harvesting signals the plant to branch out and grow bushier instead of tall and leggy.

# Week 4+: Harvesting

Your plants are producing. Proper harvesting technique is the difference between a plant that lasts 2 months and one that lasts 6.

## The Right Way to Harvest Herbs

- Cut stems just above a leaf node (where two leaves branch out). Two new stems will grow from that point.
- Never take more than one-third of the plant at once. It needs leaves to photosynthesize and keep growing.
- Harvest from the top and outside first. This keeps the plant compact and bushy instead of tall and sparse.
- Use sharp scissors or kitchen shears. Tearing stems damages the plant and invites disease.

## Pinching for More Growth

When basil or mint starts growing a flower spike (a taller stem with tiny buds at the tip), pinch it off immediately. Flowering signals the plant to stop producing leaves and put energy into seeds instead. Regular pinching extends the harvest by weeks or months. This is the single best habit for herb growers.

## Lettuce Harvesting

Harvest outer leaves only — let the center keep growing. A single lettuce plant can produce for 2–3 months this way. Take 3–4 outer leaves per harvest, twice a week. Once it sends up a tall central stalk, it is bolting and the leaves will turn bitter. Time to replant.

## Storing Fresh Herbs

- Basil: room temperature in a glass of water (not the fridge — cold turns it black).
- Cilantro, parsley, mint: upright in a glass of water in the fridge, loose plastic bag over the top.
- Freeze extras: chop herbs, pack into ice cube trays, top with olive oil. Drop cubes into cooking.

### TIP

Harvest in the morning before the lights have been on too long. Herbs are most flavorful when the leaves are cool and turgid.

# Five Mistakes to Avoid

I have made every one of these. Here is how to skip the learning curve.

- 1 Ignoring the water level**

The most common failure. Roots dry out faster than you think, especially once plants are established and drinking heavily. Check every 2–3 days. Set a phone reminder if you have to. A dry reservoir for even 24 hours sets plants back a week.
- 2 Over-feeding nutrients**

More nutrients does not mean faster growth. It means nutrient burn — brown, crispy leaf tips that do not recover. Follow the schedule. Start at half strength with third-party nutrients and increase only if plants look pale and slow.
- 3 Skipping the thinning step**

Leaving all seedlings in a pod guarantees weak, leggy plants that produce fewer leaves. It feels wasteful to cut healthy sprouts, but one strong plant produces more than three crowded ones combined.
- 4 Letting plants bolt unchecked**

Flower stems on basil and cilantro mean the plant is pivoting from leaf production to seed production. Once it flowers, the leaves turn bitter. Pinch flower buds the moment you see them — check every few days.
- 5 Placing the unit in direct sunlight**

Sounds helpful but it is not. The built-in LEDs already provide the right light spectrum. Direct sun overheats the water (warm water holds less oxygen and breeds bacteria) and accelerates bolting. A bright room is fine; a sunny windowsill is not.

## WATCH OUT

Bonus: do not use tap water that has been through a water softener. The sodium damages roots over time. Use unsoftened tap, filtered, or bottled water instead.

# What's Next

You have the basics down. Here are the resources and next steps that will take your growing from beginner to confident.

## Go Deeper

- Nutrients guide — third-party options that cost less and work as well. [sproutflat.com/nutrients-guide/](https://sproutflat.com/nutrients-guide/)
- Troubleshooting — fast fixes for every common problem (algae, root rot, yellow leaves). [sproutflat.com/troubleshooting-guide/](https://sproutflat.com/troubleshooting-guide/)
- Herb growing guide — which herbs are worth the pod slot and which are overrated. [sproutflat.com/herb-growing-guide/](https://sproutflat.com/herb-growing-guide/)
- System comparisons — detailed breakdowns of AeroGarden vs iDOO vs Click & Grow. [sproutflat.com/systems-guide/](https://sproutflat.com/systems-guide/)

## Try New Crops

Once you are comfortable with basil and lettuce, branch out. Thai basil has more complex flavor than sweet basil. Chives are nearly indestructible. Small pepper varieties (like Thai chilis) work in the Bounty's taller deck. Each crop has its own rhythm.

## Save Money Long-Term

- Switch to blank pods and your own seeds — 10x cheaper than pre-seeded pods.
- Use General Hydroponics Flora Series instead of AeroGarden's solution — half the cost per dose.
- Run the cost calculator at [sproutflat.com/cost-calculator/](https://sproutflat.com/cost-calculator/) to see your actual break-even point.

## Stay Connected

The [sproutflat.com](https://sproutflat.com) newsletter delivers weekly growing tips and honest product reviews. No fluff, no affiliate spam — just what works and what does not.

**Happy growing!**

– Mel