



How to Grow the

EDIBLE GARDEN

in Containers



How to Grow the Edible Garden in Containers

Growing part or all of your edible garden in containers is an excellent, versatile solution for small spaces, or if your yard is not well-suited to in-ground or raised garden beds due to contaminated soil, poor access to sunlight, or other issues. Container gardening tends to be more accessible and more ergonomic for gardeners of every ability. As well, containers are portable enough to be moved if weather extremes dictate and they can be placed wherever they are best suited. Containers filled with culinary herbs and vegetables such as green onions and tomatoes may be placed near a patio door adjacent to the kitchen for easy harvesting when cooking, for example. Container gardens are generally very low-maintenance and need little care beyond regular watering and fertilizing. Weeding is usually unnecessary, which is a huge benefit. Here are a few tips to successfully grow vegetables, herbs, and other edible crops in containers.



Choosing a Container

Containers for your plants can be made from a wide range of materials, and are usually selected to suit your garden style and aesthetic. Some gardeners favour traditional looks, such as terracotta, stone, and wood, while others love the colours and decorative elements of plastic or resin. Geotextiles (a specialized fabric) are becoming increasingly popular. Upcycled containers made from fabric shopping bags, food-safe tubs, and wooden crates are other options. Be creative with your selections, but remember that some of them may have drawbacks. Terracotta, for example, is porous and offers good drainage, but it dries out quickly. Metal containers can heat up quickly in the sun, which may be detrimental to plants. Wood can rot if a preservative is not applied.

Drainage

No matter which type of container you choose, good drainage is key. The roots of your plants should not be left to sit in standing water all the time – this encourages rot, mould, and a host of other problems. If your container does not have drainage holes, drill or punch some into the base. Some containers are not suitable for adding drainage holes; you can insert a cache pot into them. This is an inexpensive, plain plastic pot that has drainage holes in the base. Your plant should be grown in the cache pot, which is then placed into the decorative pot. Bear in mind that when you water, the water will pool at the base of the cache pot, and sit in the decorative pot. Empty out the decorative pot so that the cache pot isn't left for too long in standing water. (Do the same thing if you are using saucers beneath your plants.) Don't add gravel to the base of your plant pots for drainage. This simply decreases the amount of soil that the plant roots have to grow in and water will pool in the gravel.



Cleaning and Sanitizing Containers

Before planting up your containers, ensure they are clean and sanitized. Use hot, soapy water to scrub out any remnants of soil from a previous use, and follow up with a diluted solution of rubbing alcohol and water (about 1 part rubbing alcohol to 10 parts of water). Rinse the containers thoroughly. Clean them at the end of the season to prepare them for winter storage. (Containers that may crack in the cold should be brought indoors over the winter).

Growing Ingredients

There are many different combinations of ingredients and mixes to use in containers, but a basic, easy recipe consists of one part loam, one part peat moss or coir fibre, and one part compost. This type of mix has suitable nutrient content and water-holding capacity, and can be used for a wide variety of edible and ornamental plants. If you want to add other ingredients such as perlite and vermiculite, you can – these will help increase the porosity of the mix. Do not use garden or field soil in your containers, as it is too heavy and dense and will compact easily. It does not have the porosity needed. (It works for your in-ground plants because it is not confined to a small, contained space).



Siting

Most vegetables perform best in full sun conditions (more than 6 hours per day). When planting your containers, situate them in a location where the plants will receive the amount of light they need to perform at their best. Offer them a site out of extreme heat and blasting, drying winds – this will mean less work for you as you won't have to water as much!

Plant Selections

Most vegetables will perform well in containers, but you have to consider the mature size and sprawl of some of them (full-sized pumpkins, for example, are not necessarily the best choice for a container due to their massive growth and the fact that the fruit is so heavy). Some plants may need trellises and support. (Indeterminate tomatoes, for example, will need cages or staking.) When browsing through seed catalogues or looking at transplants in the garden centre, think about purchasing plants that are dwarf or compact in stature, or specifically bred for container growing.

Perennial vegetables such as asparagus and rhubarb should be left to in-ground beds; they will usually not survive the winter in containers in cold climates. When planting up a container, choose plants that have similar needs. Don't mix shade and sun lovers, for example, or plants that prefer dry conditions with those that like consistent moisture.



Watering

Containers tend to dry out more quickly than in-ground or raised beds, as they have a smaller volume and the soil is lighter in texture. If the containers are placed in an exposed area, hot sun and drying winds can influence how readily the soil dries out. Keep a close eye on your plants – especially during the heat of summer – and stick to a regular, consistent watering schedule. Some gardeners may be able to install a drip irrigation system to water their containers on a timer; this is ideal if budget and logistics allow. (It may be too tricky to set up if the containers are far away from a water source, for example.) If you water by hand, don't dump water onto the foliage of the plants; rather, water at the base of the plants. This helps prevent the spread of fungal-based pathogens, if they are present.

Fertilizer

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Pruning

To keep your plants happy, healthy, and tidy, some pruning from time-to-time throughout the growing season may be necessary. Remove dead or broken stems or branches whenever you spot them. If the plant has dense, crossing branches and a thick growth of foliage, air circulation could be an issue. Lightly pruning a few select stems may open up the canopy of the plant and prevent infection by the pathogens that cause plant diseases. For edible crops, you are not likely to deadhead flowers, as those flowers will turn into fruit later on. Keep them intact to reap the harvest.

Pests and Diseases

Generally, you'll have less trouble with creatures such as slugs when growing in containers; aphids and caterpillars may still be issues, however, and you can still run into problems with bacterial and fungal diseases.

To deal with aphids, you can rub them off of stems and leaves with a soft, damp cloth or a pair of gardening gloves. A strong blast of water from the garden hose may dislodge them (this is one time you can water the foliage).

Caterpillars may be hand-picked and destroyed or relocated (you may wish to do the latter if you know which species of insect it belongs to. Killing them may mean you are destroying a beneficial pollinator insect). Powdery mildew is a common fungal disease that affects many types of edible plants, including – notably – squash and cucumbers. If you are comfortable with using fungicides, you can purchase some from a garden centre that may work. Some gardeners use a solution of sodium bicarbonate (baking soda) and dormant oil (available in garden centres), with some efficacy. A spray made of milk is another common treatment, with mixed results. If powdery mildew is a problem year after year, work to increase the air circulation around your plants. Do not crowd them in their containers. Prune them if their stems become too dense and heavy. Do not overfertilize your plants – the excess nitrogen may cause succulent, new growth that is more susceptible to infection.

Overwintering Container-Grown Plants

Most of your container-grown vegetables are annuals, and once they are harvested and the first frosts hit, you'll clean the containers out and compost the finished plant material. Some herbs, such as basil, may be saved and overwintered indoors. Before the cold weather kicks in, quarantine the plants in a location such as a garage. It is likely that the soil will contain insects such as fungus gnats, so use yellow sticky traps to combat the bugs before the plants are brought into the house. You can also remove the plants from their pots, rinse the roots, and repot them into fresh soil. It is a messy job but healthy for the plants. Once you are certain the insects are gone and the plants have adjusted to the conditions of the garage, you can bring them inside the house for a few hours each day. Keep them in a window where they receive indirect (not bright) sunlight. Be cautious with watering and do not offer them too much. After a week or so, the plants will be ready to move into their new winter home. Even if your garden is tiny, you can still grow food! Be creative and enjoy the rewards of container gardening in any space.

