

Vegetable Gardening in Containers

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Growing vegetables in containers has many advantages over gardening directly in the soil. It's convenient. Plants may be grown close to the doorstep or kitchen. They can be moved to sunnier, shadier, or warmer locations as necessary. Containers may be set on shelves or pedestals to ease back strain. Vegetable plants can be selected with color and texture for an artistic effect. Perhaps most importantly, containers allow you to indulge your gardening interest in a limited space as well as having the pleasure and convenience of fresh vegetables close to your door.

The extremes of container vegetable gardening range from growing alfalfa sprouts in a fruit jar to growing vegetables in raised beds. However, most container vegetable gardening is done in movable containers from one to five gallons or larger in size. Container choices range from practical plastic pots to whimsical recycled vessels such as teapots and inverted straw hats. One caveat is that adequate drain holes must be provided at one inch or less from the bottom of the container.

Besides a suitable container, you will need a soil-less organic potting mix of a depth at least six to ten inches. The potting mix should be kept from drying out. So daily watering may be necessary for large, actively growing plants. However, when young and before they become well established, plants may only require watering twice weekly. Check for moisture by inserting your index finger to the depth of your second knuckle. The mix should feel cool and damp but not wet. Soggy soil excludes air that is necessary for the health of the plant roots.

The plants must also receive a minimum of six to eight hours of direct sunlight each day. Fertilize weekly with a balanced fertilizer. Follow the directions on the label. Once a month the plants should be flushed with water until the water flows freely from the bottom of the container. Water from your rain barrel, if you have one, is excellent for flushing any build-up of salts from the potting media.

Place taller plants on the side of the container that is away from the sun. The density of plants in your container garden can be controlled by thinning or harvesting the plants when their crowns touch. You can make use of vertical space with vine crops grown on a sturdy trellis that is firmly attached to the pot. Good examples are tomatoes, cucumbers, pole beans (scarlet runner), and sugar snap peas. Some plants require much more space than others. Examples are sweet corn, okra, cabbage, and members of the squash family. Nurseries and seed companies offer dwarf varieties that are excellent for container gardening. However, most vegetable varieties can be grown in containers with great success.

Tomatoes are a big favorite for porch gardening because of their flavor, adaptability to trellising, and availability of a few dwarf cultivars. A few of my personal favorite vegetables are the condiments such as chives, garlic chives, green onions, green shallots, parsley, basil, dill, mint, cilantro, red mustard, and arugula. Small amounts of these tasty and easy-to-grow vegetables go a long way toward adding flavor to your favorite dishes.

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