

Container Gardening for Small Spaces

Written by Laura Lee Rose

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Using containers is a great way to grow edibles if you have limited space. Keep in mind that containers may need more watering than an “in ground” garden. Window boxes and large pots are ideal for growing mini gardens of vegetables and herbs.

One of my favorites is a plastic milk crate lined with screen or landscape fabric. Fill with potting soil or compost and plant away! This is a great way to plant Irish and sweet potatoes. At the end of the season you have a crate of tubers!

Clean the container with soap and water; use a brush if there is salt or soil residue. You could also spray with rubbing alcohol, or dip in a 10% bleach solution and rinse. This will help to get rid of any pathogens or insects that might be hiding in the cracks.

Use good potting soil or compost. It isn't a good idea to use garden soil because of soil borne pests. Some potting soils will have fertilizers mixed in. Even if you do use them you should count on adding nutrients to the containers as a side dressing during the growing season if plants start to yellow or aren't growing well. Garden fertilizers can be used; follow the directions on the label for amounts and application information. Compost teas can be used to water plants as well. Some fertilizers are meant to be applied as liquid or foliar feeding. Of course, it depends on the crop that you are growing how much Nitrogen, Phosphorous, and Potassium the plants need to thrive. Beans don't need a lot of Nitrogen because they can make it from the air. Tomatoes, onions, and squash need extra N. Keep in mind that you can plant things together that complement each other, check the plants often for pests and don't forget to fertilize.

If you are growing in containers or small garden try looking for vegetables that are petite, mini, or dwarf. They will take up less space and may even be ready to harvest sooner than the old

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standby. Root crops can be picked at any stage of development, radishes, carrots, and beets could be picked small, and the greens are good to eat too. Cucumbers, yellow and zucchini squash are especially delicious when eaten young. 'Honey Bear' is an acorn squash that is just right for a serving when halved. Greens that are directly sown into a container or bed can be harvested as microgreens, so there is a continuous supply of salad fixin's. I like to combine edible flowers and herbs with the salad mix. Pansy, nasturtium, and arugula flowers are sweet and spicy respectively. Some other Lilliputians are 'Sugar Baby' watermelon only eight inches across, 'Peter Pan' pattypan squash two to three inches across and great on the grill, 'Golden Baby Bell' peppers can be picked when they're one inch long; 'Toy choi' bok choy at 5 inches each plant is a perfect serving, and 'Baby Bubba' okra has beautiful blooms, can be grown on a patio, and the pods can be picked at 2" or fully ripe at 4".

Vertical gardening can allow plants with tendrils to climb. Use poles, wire, or netting to support the vines and this increases gardening real estate. Keep the supports on the north side of the pot or bed to prevent shading of the plants. Some garden catalogues offer planters with pouches and pockets to further add vertical interest and growing room for vegetables or flowers. Wall gardens, railing hangers and free standing vertical planters are being offered in local garden centers for your gardening fun and culinary delights.

Enjoy!