

My Time – Relaxation and Rejuvenation

Green Thumb for Small Spaces

by Angie Mansfield

You dream of home-grown salads. Long for fresh-picked tomatoes and cucumbers. Wish for fresh-plucked herbs in your dinner dishes.

There's just one problem: your yard is small. Really small. Or nonexistent.

Not to worry; even if you live in a concrete jungle, you can grow your own delicious vegetables, fruits, and herbs. All you need is a sunny spot to put a few planters. Don't believe me? Read on.

Container gardening isn't exactly a new concept. People in the heart of cities have been gardening on the rooftops and balconies of their apartment buildings for years. It's just that only recently have seed companies begun producing compact varieties of the vegetables we all know and love—compact varieties that seem tailor-made for container growth. This, coupled with a little knowledge of which veggies take to containers the best, may be all you need to keep your family in fresh produce this season — yard or no yard.

If you have an open spot on a patio, front step or balcony, you've got the space you need to garden. If not, how about a spot inside next to a south-facing, sunny window? If even that's not an option, then you may want to invest in a grow light; they can be purchased fairly inexpensively either online or at your local garden center, and many veggies can be grown under one in almost any space in the house.

Perhaps you have a small outdoor plot but don't want to give up the



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flower bed currently residing there. Not to worry; plenty of vegetables will grow happily alongside your flowers in containers set in the flower bed. In fact, the flowers can act as a sort of screen, "hiding" your vegetables from potential insect pests.

Container gardeners have a few other advantages over those with in-ground gardens. First, there's less chance of disease, as many plant diseases are carried in the garden soil — which you can avoid by using commercial potting soil (more on this later). Second, there's no need to weed, since the unwanted greenery stands much less chance of getting a root-hold in a planter than it does in a garden bed. Third (and possibly most important), a container garden is relatively portable; you can move your crops to maximize space and lighting conditions, something impossible in an in-ground garden.

Getting the Kids Involved

Another great benefit of container gardening is that it's kid-friendly. A child who's less than enthusiastic about spending hours on his knees pulling weeds may take much more interest in watching seedlings sprout in a container he planted himself. You

can add to his fun by using classic terra cotta pots and letting him paint them, creating his own garden. Beets, some beans and many varieties of lettuce are easy to grow and amateur-resistant, making them excellent choices for your budding gardener's corner of the patio.

Soil Considerations

The first rule of container gardening: do not use soil dug from an in-ground garden! You could introduce weed seeds, pests or diseases to your container plants. This type of soil also tends to be heavier and becomes compacted when watered, which can smother the roots of your plants. Instead, use a commercial potting mix — but not one formulated for specific plants (like roses) unless you're growing that specific plant. Also, vegetables require a good fertilization program; you may want to mix time-released fertilizer granules into your potting soil before planting, then follow up with liquid fertilizer as directed on the package.

Container choices

Here's another great thing about container gardening: almost anything can hold your garden. Use large plastic buckets, old salad bowls, wash-tubs, a kid's old toy box or anything

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else your imagination dreams up. Just keep in mind the soil depth requirements for the plants you plan on putting in the container; most vegetables will require at least 8 inches, while large vine or bush-type plants (like tomatoes or beans) will need deeper soil. Tomatoes and vine vegetables will also need a trellis or pole for support. Whatever you use for your container, be sure to drill drainage holes in the bottom.

A few notes on specific container materials: terra cotta planters look great with plants and are good “classic” containers. Terra cotta does tend to dry out quickly, however, so your plants will need lots of watering. Metal can expose plant roots to temperature extremes; use them indoors or if the climate in your area is mild. Plastic is a good all-around planter choice: It is lightweight, holds moisture well, and tends to be relatively inexpensive. Wood containers are lovely, but be aware of the risk of rot; redwood or cedar is fairly rot-resistant; otherwise, coat your container inside and out with a sealant.

Hanging baskets are a great way to extend the space available for growing, and beautiful displays can be created with a few baskets hung in front of a window or under a porch roof.

Indoor Vegetables

Perhaps the greatest benefit of container gardening is being able to grow your garden inside year-round. Many veggies thrive in indoor gardens with a few special considerations. For the most part, you will need a sunny south-facing window or a special plant grow light (or a combination of the two). If you use grow lights, you will need a fixture that will hold one warm-white and one cool-white fluorescent grow bulb. These can be purchased fairly inexpensively either online or from your local garden supply center.

The best plants for indoor containers include:



Beets. Beets are excellent salad plants, as the entire plant is edible. They are also

fairly amateur-proof and are an excellent choice for a child’s garden. I recommend the Chioggia variety for its beautiful swirls of pink or red and white, which look beautiful grated raw into a salad.



Carrots. Excellent for containers, as they take up little space and can be planted among other veggies. I recommend one of the round or shorter varieties unless you’re growing them in a deep container that can accommodate the longer ones.



Lettuce. There are many types to choose from, and lettuce is very easy to grow. It also seems to be designed for the container gardener. Lettuce thrives in small containers on the windowsill or in a larger container with other salad greens.

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Using the USDA Hardiness Zone Map to Extend the Growing Season

Whether you have space or want to maximize your growing season, the Hardiness Zone Map is a planning tool to befriend. The Zone Map breaks the country into several zones by average coldest temperatures. The lower the number of your zone, the colder the average winter in your area. Seed descriptions often contain this information, telling you in which zones the plant will grow best. For an extended harvest, you’ll also need to know the average date of the first frost in your area. If you’re not sure when this is, the National Weather Service, a local garden supply center and the *Farmer’s Almanac* are good resources.

You can also use this easy formula, on-the-fly, for calculating the latest planting date and avoid having your last harvest ruined by freezing.

Extending warm-season plants

Aim for a maturation date for warm-season vegetables (such as tomatoes, squash and beans) of at least two weeks before the average first frost. (Most seed companies include the number of days from planting to harvest on their seed packets.) For a fall harvest add an extra week to ten days to this number to compensate for the shorter days and cooler temperatures during the plant’s growing season. Then subtract the total number of days needed to grow from the earliest average frost date to get your latest planting date for that vegetable or fruit. For example, with tomatoes, if the first frost in your area is October 15, tomatoes should start maturing no later than October 1. If your tomato variety matures in 60 days, add a week to that to get 67, and subtract from the maturation date of October 1. Late tomatoes should therefore be planted on or around July 25 to beat the frost.

Extending cool-season plants

Swiss chard is a cool-season plant that can be harvested up to two weeks after the first frost. Using the same frost date from above means that Swiss chard can be harvested until the end of the month. Since it matures in 60 days, using the formula described, it will need to be planted around August 25. Many leafy greens are excellent choices for extending your growing season, as they prefer the cool weather of early spring and fall and can withstand a light frost.

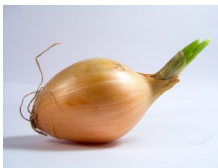
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This is a great way to experiment with different looks for your container garden; lettuce varieties come in a wide array of leaf styles and colors that create a stunning display when mixed and matched in a window container.



Mustard Greens.

Rapid maturation is a nice feature of these greens; they can be planted along with longer-maturing vegetables (like tomatoes), and will be harvested by the time the other vegetable needs the room. I like the Red Giant variety for its beautiful leaves: dark green overlaid with red.



Onions. If you want big onion bulbs, you're probably better off putting them in

large containers outdoors and be aware that it takes quite awhile for onions to reach those large bulb sizes. However, grown in small containers indoors and harvested in their tender green stage (at about 35 days), they make a great addition to salads or whole as a garnish.



Radishes. Another quick-to-mature choice— radishes— are a breeze to grow. And

they come in many different varieties; for a child's garden, I suggest a variety packet called Easter Egg, as it includes several different colors — so you never know what you're going to get when you pick one!



Swiss

Chard. Another great green, chard is a vigorous producer that is toler-

ant of warm or cool season growing. And it produces some really lovely greenery; the Bright Lights variety boasts stems in an array of colors from hot pink to white.



Tomatoes. That's right, even tomatoes can thrive indoors. They do, however, require a lot of sun; you'll need a south-facing window or a grow light to

Organic Pest Control

The good news is that container gardening allows easier control of garden pests; the bad news is that those pests can still find your vegetables. Chemical insecticides don't discriminate; they kill both the pests and the beneficial insects that you need for pollination and to prey on other bugs; they also present a danger to any young children who may be tempted to pick a tasty tomato or green bean off the vine and pop it straight in their mouths.

The alternative: organic pest control. There are several ways you can protect your harvest from the voracious onslaught without resorting to nuking them. First is companion planting, which means planting another vegetable or a flower next to your crops to repel unwanted bugs. For instance, marigolds are often planted alongside tomatoes to repel whiteflies. Mint is also a good insect repellent and attracts beneficial bugs like predatory wasps to help you hunt other insects. One word of caution about mint: you may want to keep it in a separate pot alongside your vegetables, as it tends to be very invasive and can take over a small garden plot.

Your second choice for organic pest control is to simply pick the insects off. This is, obviously, much easier with just a few bugs than with a whole horde, so check your veggies daily (watering is a good time to give them a once-over). Look at the stems and the underside of leaves and pick off any pests you find.

As a last resort, there are some organic pesticides and insecticidal soaps available to help get rid of a particularly stubborn infestation. Your local garden supply center will be able to explain how to use each one. Though these are plant-derived and ecologically friendlier than traditional chemical pesticides, they can still be toxic. Be sure to read and follow the label, and if you have any questions, ask your garden supply center for help.

succeed with indoor tomatoes. But it will be worth it when you can pick fresh tomatoes for salads in the middle of winter.

Container gardens sound great, but what you really want is to turn that little patch of ground next to the house into a regular in-ground garden. The thing is, you're not sure what to plant; there's such a wide array of vegetable choices (and varieties of each) that you're stumped. And what if you want a tomato or two? Won't that take up the whole plot?

Not necessarily. With a little creative planning, you can get quite a harvest

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out of that little plot. Your first step is to decide which vegetables you really want to grow. Do you have a family of salad lovers? There are many varieties of lettuce and other greens that grow well in small spaces. Add a few radishes, carrots, and beets (all are also good in small areas), and you have the makings of terrific salads all season.

And you don't have to give up your tomato crop to do it. Lettuces and radishes tend to have a short maturation compared to other vegetables. Plant your tomatoes, then plant your quick-maturing salad veggies around them. By the time your tomatoes get big enough to need the space, you will have harvested the lettuce and radishes.

You can also use trellises to grow vine crops like squash or cucumbers without having them take over the entire area. And a trellis of cucumbers as a backdrop to a few tomatoes and salad greens will make a beautiful garden out of that tiny plot.

Your outdoor container garden is limited only by the number of containers you can fit in your space. Look for compact or dwarf varieties of your favorite vegetables when possible. And remember, plants with widely varying needs which could never grow side-by-side in an in-ground garden, can be displayed next to one another in containers to liven up a dull corner of your patio or balcony. So be creative – and enjoy your harvest! ☑



Angie Mansfield lives, works and writes in southern Minnesota. She lives with a mouthy cat and a neurotic dog.

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