

EATING HEALTHY CAN BEGIN IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD CONTAINER GARDEN

Learn How To Get Started And Grow Your Own Vegetables And Herbs

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When you watch or read the news, you most likely see stories about how people are getting back-to-basics and planting vegetable and herb gardens. You hear about free neighborhood gardens, rooftop gardens, organic gardens, urban gardens, children's gardens—even about the president's garden. Everyone seems to be jumping on the garden bandwagon to save on grocery bills, avoid pesticides, eat more healthful, have fresh herbs at their fingertips, or to serve their family fresher produce that hasn't travelled across the country and become nutritionally depleted from the journey.

However, gardening can be a lot of work. Unless you dig (pardon the pun) getting out in the dirt, pulling weeds and battling gnats, gardening can be tedious and time consuming. Or, maybe you love the earth between your fingers, but simply don't have the space for a garden of any size. Perhaps you have a disability or limited mobility that keeps you from gardening in the ground. Well, your solution may be container gardening. It's much less time consuming, you can place the pots in a convenient and accessible location, it's more economical than regular gardening, and you can make your garden fit your space. All you really need is a patio, driveway, deck, balcony or doorstep—you can even container garden inside using sunny windowsills and/or floor areas of a room.

Where do you begin?

The first thing to do is decide where you want to put your container garden—inside, outside or both. Determine how much space you want to allocate, then measure and take a picture of the area. This will help you when you go to get your containers. Remember, you can start small with one to three containers, with the intent to add more every year, as you get more comfortable. Also, determine upfront what you want to plant—herbs, vegetables or both—this will factor into what size containers you need. Herbs can use smaller containers, but they should have at least a six-inch diameter opening with eight inches of soil depth. Vegetables will need larger containers (2- to 10-gallons) depending on how many plants you want to put in each container. The main goal is to choose a container that does not restrict root growth.

Also, consider the following guidelines when choosing your containers.

- Avoid containers with narrow openings.
- Glazed ceramic pots are best, but you can also choose an unglazed terracotta pot, a sturdy plastic container or a wood container, preferably redwood or cedar.
- The container **MUST** have adequate drainage. If the container does not have drainage holes, you will need to drill holes with at least a ½ inch diameter into the bottom.
- If the container sits flat to the ground, it may not drain properly, so it is best to elevate the container at least one or two inches off the ground using blocks, bricks or other stable booster.

Getting your hands dirty.

The type of soil you choose for your containers should be fairly lightweight. Soil straight from your yard is too heavy, unless your yard has sandy soil. The clay soil usually found in yards consists of extremely small particles and in a container, the bad qualities of clay are exaggerated. It holds too much moisture when wet, resulting in too little air for the roots. Soil in a container should drain rapidly, but retain enough moisture to keep the roots evenly moist.

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The following are the ideal soil mixtures for containers, which can be purchased at local garden centers.

- Compost (your own or purchased)
- Potting soil mixtures
- Soilless potting mixtures

When you fill your containers, leave a two-inch space between the top of the soil and the top of the container. This will allow you to add mulch after you plant, which aids in keeping the moisture in your container. If you are not using compost, fertilizing is also recommended using a water-soluble fertilizer every two or three weeks (consider using organic fertilizer if available). Be sure not to over-fertilize; container plants do not have the buffer of large volumes of soil and fertilizer burn can kill your plants. You will also have to pay particular attention when it comes to watering your container garden. The volume of soil is small and the containers can dry out quickly, especially if they are on concrete or are in full sunlight. In fact, daily or twice-daily watering may be required. It's best to water the containers until water begins to come out of the drainage holes.

What plants should you choose?

Now that your containers are set up, it's time to plant. Almost any type of vegetable or herb is suitable for container gardening, but with anything, some are better than others. You can buy your plants at most area greenhouses or garden centers. If you are especially ambitious, you can start growing your plants from seeds.

Vegetables for 2-gallon containers

- Green Onion – Beltsville Bunching, Crystal Wax, Evergreen Bunching
- Squash – Scallopini, Baby Crookneck, Creamy, Golden Nugget, Gold Rush, Zucchini, Dixie, Gold Neck, Early Prolific Straightneck, Diplomat, Senator
- Turnips – any variety

Vegetables for 5-gallon containers

- Beans – Blue Lake, Contender, Tavera, White Dixie Wonder, Top Crop, Greencrop, Kentucky Wonder
- Beets – Early Wonder, Detroit Dark Red
- Broccoli – Super Blend, Italian Green Sprouting, Packman, Bonanza
- Cabbage – Discovery, Chinese Cabbage (Michihli)
- Carrots – Little Finger, Thumbelina, Scarlet Nantes, Baby Spike
- Cucumber – Spacemaster, Burpless, Liberty, Early Pik, Crispy, Salty
- Eggplant – Black Beauty, Rosa Bianca, Florida Market, Long Tom
- Lettuce – Buttercrunch, Salad Bowl, Romaine, Dark Green Boston, Ruby, Bibb, Grand Rapids, Oak Leaf, Little Gem
- Peppers – Sweet Banana, Yolo Wonder, Cayenne, Bell, Keystone Resistant, California Wonder, New Ace, Red Cherry, Jalapeno, Thai Hot
- Radish – Cherry Belle, Icicle, Champion, Scarlet Globe
- Spinach – Dark Green Bloomsdale, Melody, America, Avon Hybrid
- Tomatoes – Tiny Tim, Small Fry, Sweet 100, Patio, Burpee's Pixie, Toy Boy, Early Girl, Better Boy VFN, Pixie, Red Robin, Sugar Lump, Tumbler Tom, Saladette, Spring Giant

Herbs

- Sage, Rosemary, Chives, Dill, Basil, Saw Palmetto, Anise, Chervil, Coriander, Summer Savory, Caraway, Parsley, Fennel Marjoram, Mint, Tarragon, Thyme, Winter Savory, Cilantro, Chamomile, Garlic, Oregano, Lemon Balm, Calendula, Lavender, Catnip, Nasturtium, French Tarragon, Ginger

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Common problems with container gardening.

Even though container gardening is generally successful, you can encounter problems with your plants. Try not to get discouraged; there are corrective measures that you can take to save your plants.

If your plants become tall, spindly and unproductive, they probably are not getting enough light or are getting excessive nitrogen. Try moving the container to an area where it will receive more light and reduce the amount and frequency of fertilizer.

If your plants are yellowing from the bottom and lack vigor or have a poor color, they probably are getting too much water. Reduce your watering intervals and be sure the container has ample drainage holes.

If your plants are wilting even though you are watering them enough, be sure the container's drainage is sufficient and add more holes, if necessary.

If your plants have stunted growth and are sickly and have a purplish color, they may be located in too cool an area. Relocate them to a warmer area or bring inside, if possible.

If your plants have holes in the leaves or the leaves become distorted in shape, you most likely have an insect problem. It's best to use an EPA-recommended insecticide found at most garden centers.

If your plants have spots, dead or dried areas, or powdery or rusty areas, they might have a disease. Remove the diseased areas and use a EPA-recommended fungicide.

Now that you see how easy it is to get your container garden up and running—go for it! There is nothing like harvesting, cooking and eating fresh vegetables and herbs that you and your family grew together.

About the Foundation The Pottstown Area Health & Wellness Foundation's mission is to enhance the health and wellness of area residents, providing education, funding and programs that motivate people to adopt healthy lifestyles. Visit www.pottstownfoundation.org for more information about the Foundation. Discover Pottstown area's new online community at www.missionhealthyliving.org to learn and share great information on how to lead a healthier life! You can also follow Mission Healthy Living on Facebook and Twitter.