

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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As baby boomers downsize to smaller homes and young professionals enjoy the benefits of living in a dense, urban environment, both long-time and budding gardeners are discovering the benefits of container gardening.

Any gardener with at least one square foot of space on a deck, patio or balcony can grow a favorite vegetable or a cluster of fragrant flowers. Even in situation where no land is available – such as a high-rise condo – a series of appropriately sized containers can host enough tomatoes to make salsa for a summer. Depending on their size, many containers can be moved to follow the sun's rays or simply to freshen the design of the outdoor space.

Almost any plant can be grown in a container. Gardeners simply need to decide what to grow by asking themselves questions like:

- What does my family like to eat?
- What is expensive or difficult to find in the markets?
- What tastes better fresh out of the garden?

Some common answers to these questions include tomatoes, leafy greens such as spinach or leaf lettuce, and carrots. Almost any flower will do well in a container, too.

Once a list of desired vegetables and/or flowers has been created, gardeners can set about preparing their container(s). The following tips will help to ensure container gardening success.

Choose a container

Almost anything can be used as a container, from store-bought pots to old wheelbarrows, coffee or olive oil cans, or five gallon buckets. Drainage is important, though. If there are no existing holes in the bottom of the container, drill half-inch holes near the bottom along the sides. In the cool Pacific Northwest, use dark-colored containers for heat-loving crops such as tomatoes and eggplant, and light-colored containers for crops that prefer cool weather, such as leafy greens and bush peas.

The size of the container should be determined by the root needs of the individual plants. Tomatoes and broccoli have deep roots and will do best in deeper pots (such as five-gallon bucket); lettuces or gourmet musclun mixes can tolerate shallow containers (six inches deep). The size of the container helps determine the eventual size of the plant. For a prolific squash plant, plant those zucchini seeds in a large container.

Place the containers in their desired locations: warm, sunny spaces for heat-loving plants, and east-facing or otherwise cooler spots for plants that crave milder temperatures. Keep in mind that most vegetables, herbs and flowers need at least six hours of sun each day.

Add soil

First, cover the pot's drainage holes with vinyl window screening. A layer of gravel can be used to permit drainage, but some gardeners choose not to use this method because it increases the weight of the pot and decreases the available rooting depth for the plants.

A quality, porous planting mix found at a nursery or garden center is the best choice for filling containers. Regular soil is cheaper, granted, but it's heavier and will

compact over time, making the containers difficult to move and lessening the plants' ability to absorb water and nutrients.

Compost – homemade or purchased from a local nursery – makes a great growing medium for most plants. Homemade compost should be mixed with regular garden soil at a 50/50 rate. Another choice is potting mix, which can be purchased or made at home with equal parts of sand, loamy garden soil and compost or peat moss (coconut husks, or “coir, “ are a viable alternative to peat moss, if available).

Plant seeds or seedlings according to packet or label instructions. If clustering several varieties in one pot, group plants together according to growth habits and water needs.

Water and fertilize

Plants in containers can't send roots deeper when they run low on water, so watering is extremely important for container gardening success.

Water plants consistently, paying close attention to how quickly each container dries out. Terra cotta pots, for example, lose moisture more rapidly than plastic pots. On hot days, watering shallow containers every day usually is needed. To test for moisture levels, push a finger one inch into the soil each day or use a water meter, which can be purchased for less than \$10.

Applying mulch around plants in containers will help to minimize rapid evaporation of water. Mulch material can be dried grass clippings, straw, compost, newspaper, nut shells (unsalted!), wood chips, leaves or cocoa hulls. If an adventuresome dog will share the space with the containers, don't use cocoa hulls. If ingested, the hulls will make the dog very ill – or worse.

Regular fertilizing (follow label instructions) with a balanced water-soluble liquid fertilizer or variety of options will nurture, prolong and increase your harvests, whether they be spicy peppers or sassy marigolds.

Maintenance

To keep container-grown plants happy and thriving, groom the plants periodically, picking off dead leaves and flowers. It will make the plants look better and, help to prevent some diseases from getting a foothold and, in the case of flowers, will encourage reblooming throughout the summer.

Don't be overwhelmed by the many plant options for container gardening. Choose favorites, start small, water wisely ... and enjoy.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.

