

Getting Started with Container Gardening



Container gardening is one of the easiest ways to start a home vegetable garden! You can grow an amazing variety of vegetables (and even fruits) in containers, from tomatoes and peppers to lettuce, zucchini, even strawberries and raspberries! And the best part? You don't have to dig up heavy garden dirt, worry about clay or bad soil conditions, or even have a lot of room to grow tasty, healthy fruits and veggies for your family. A container garden can fit on a patio or deck, or even right by your front door. You won't have to go far to pick the ingredients for a fresh salad or delicious dinner!

Choosing A Container

Good containers for planting include half barrels, inexpensive plastic pots, glazed clay pots, 5-gallon buckets (the handle makes them easy to carry or move), or other good-sized recycled containers. Larger containers (at least 10 inches in diameter and 10 inches deep) hold in soil moisture and provide more room for plant roots. Make sure your pot has drainage holes, and add some if not, especially if you are recycling another type of container! If your pot is large, place it where you want it before filling it with soil, as it will be harder to move once it is planted.

Choose a sunny location for your container garden — most vegetable plants need 6-8 hours of sunlight a day. Make sure the pot can drain where water will not damage anything, or place a saucer underneath to catch the extra water.

Soil

For good plants, you have to start with good dirt! When buying soil for containers, look for products labeled as "Potting Mix." Check labels carefully: bags marked as *garden soil*, *topsoil*, "*partially composted*," or *mulch* will not be good for growing plants. A good-quality potting mix might cost a little more than inexpensive soil, but you will be rewarded with much healthier, happier plants and lots of tasty fruits and veggies! Do not use dirt from your garden or from the ground; it is too heavy for container planting, and your plants will not thrive.

Planting

When you have your container and your ingredients, it's time to plant! First, cover the drainage holes in the bottom of the pot with a few small rocks. (This keeps the soil from falling through, but still lets water drain.) Carefully remove your plant from its small pot. Fill the big container partway with soil, so that when you set your plant inside, the base of the plant rests about an inch below rim of the new pot. Add soil around the plant, pressing firmly with your fingers but not packing it, eliminating any air pockets around roots. Fill the container with soil to one inch below the rim. Water well.

What can I grow in a pot?

Here are some examples of what you can grow in different sizes of containers.

8-inch pot

- One of the following:
 - ✓ 1 lettuce, spinach, kale, or bean plant
 - ✓ 3 basil, cilantro, or parsley plants
 - ✓ 1 sage, oregano, or mint plant

10-inch pot

- One of the following:
 - ✓ 1 dwarf tomato plant
 - ✓ 1 pepper plant
 - ✓ 1 bush cucumber plant
 - ✓ 8 to 12 green onions, beets, radishes, or carrots

12-inch pot

- One of the following:
 - ✓ 1 regular tomato plant
 - ✓ 1 summer squash
 - ✓ 1 or two pepper plants
 - ✓ 15 carrots
 - ✓ 6 pea or bush bean plants



1-foot-square box or 18-inch pot

- One of the following:
 - ✓ 1 tomato or pepper *plus* 3 or 4 cilantro, basil, or parsley plants
 - ✓ 2 summer squash
 - ✓ 4 cucumber plants
 - ✓ 4 to 6 lettuce plants
 - ✓ 9 to 12 bush bean plants
 - ✓ 1 pumpkin plant



Check the pots daily to see how often you need to water your plants. When the top inch of soil feels dry to the touch, it's time to water. Don't wait for the plants to wilt! Clay pots dry out faster than plastic or non-porous material, and small pots faster than larger. Group pots together to keep them from drying out too fast.

Add a two- to three-inch layer of mulch to help keep moisture in soil and reduce weeds. Grass clippings, shredded bark, leaves, and compost all make good mulch.

Some plants will need support to keep them from falling over. Use a stake or wire cage for bushy plants (tomatoes, peppers), or make or buy a simple trellis for vining plants (like cucumbers and beans).

Caring For Plants

Fertilize plants about once a month with an organic fertilizer, following the package directions. (You can also mix a slow-release fertilizer with the soil at planting time.)

If the location is too hot or too cold for your plants, you can move containers to an area with more sun or shade. If it looks like the weather will get cold, move the pot to a protected area or cover it with burlap, an old sheet, or plastic. Use stakes to hold the cover material away from the plant, and take the cover off in the daytime.

Tip: A water bottle or quart milk jug can be used for slow watering. Poke a small hole with a nail or thumbtack near the bottom of the bottle, fill it with water, and set it next to the plant in the pot. The water will slowly trickle out and soak into the soil.



Happy planting!



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