

Container Garden Tips

Using containers to successfully grow a variety of vegetables is not difficult. Often, this alternative to in-ground or permanent, raised-bed gardening offers gardeners a method that is highly adaptive and easily controlled, especially for those folks who live in rental properties or who do not have the means (or space) to establish a permanent in-ground garden.

There are six things to consider when planning your vegetable container garden: **(1) pot type & size, (2) drainage, (3) sun exposure, (4) soil composition, (5) plant requirements, and (6) plant food for optimal growth.**

1. Pot Type & Size

A plant will grow in pretty much any pot or container as long as there is adequate drainage, enough room for the roots to grow, nourishing soil, and enough daily sunlight to meet its needs.

Containers include all the standard pots available for sale at garden centers. The rule of thumb is to err on the side of larger pot size than smaller. Keep in mind that the plant root system will expand (alot!) during the growing season and you want to give the roots enough space to absorb the soil nutrients and retain water.

Note: A low-cost alternative to store-bought pots is to re-purpose plastic storage bins, small galvanized trash cans, old (large) cooking pots, or even old kitchen items such as colanders, tea kettles, or plastic small trash cans. A good source of used pots and containers is through thrift stores, town transfer stations, yard sales, or neighbors who are cleaning out their storage areas. Another source is by checking with garden centers for their discarded pots - better for you to re-purpose them than have them end up in a landfill!

2. Drainage

Every pot and container should have at least four to six 1/2-inch drainage holes - again, err on the side of more drainage holes, not fewer. Plants grown in containers will quickly develop root rot if the water has nowhere to exit. Drainage is essential for successful growth.

Note: When repurposing containers, you will have to drill holes in the bottom to ensure proper drainage.

3. Sun Exposure

One of the advantages of growing plants (especially vegetables) in containers is that you can "follow the sun" so each plant gets the proper amount of light for optimal growth. Unlike in-ground or permanent raised beds, containers may be moved around if necessary and configured (and re-configured!) to maximize sun exposure during the growing season..

Before planting, check out where the sun is most intense, and how many hours it shines in that area. That's where you want to position most of your full-sun containers (tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, squash, herbs, etc.). Plants that require partial sun would be positioned on the perimeter of the "max-sun-spot", and plants that thrive with indirect light are placed beyond that perimeter.

4. Soil Composition

This one is very important. Since the product of your container garden will be eaten, you don't want the plants growing in soil that contains ANY chemicals. A good soil mix is one that includes lots of organic matter, compost, and some peat moss to aerate the soil as much as possible. Over time, container soil gets compacted so starting out with a light but organic-rich soil mixture gives the plant root system the best chance of establishing a productive growth pattern.

Note: When in doubt, check with a trusted fellow gardener or associate at a reputable nursery that specializes in organic crops.

5. Plant Requirements

Every vegetable seedling has different requirements for growth. For example, tomatoes and eggplant require large and deep pots since the plant roots tend to reach downward and out to the side. Peppers don't like to be crowded so one pepper plant in a medium pot is sufficient. Mint spreads quickly and its root system engulfs even the largest of pots.

Every plant is different. It is best to research each vegetable plant to determine pot size, number of plants per pot, sun exposure, watering needs, and feeding preferences fits best before setting up your garden. Again, talking with experienced gardeners is always beneficial!

6. Plant Food

Plants in container gardens typically require more feeding than plants grown in permanent beds. Every vegetable plant has its own preferred "feeding schedule". For example, tomatoes are heavy feeders (every one-to-two weeks) while most herbs prefer a light dosing. To make sure you are meeting your garden's needs, it is best to research each plant to discover its nutrient requirements throughout its growth season. Since the vegetables grown will be eaten, use an organic fertilizer designed to help vegetables grow and produce optimally. Trusted garden centers carry a selection of organic fertilizers that will work well for container gardens.

A Final Word

Enjoy! Container gardens are wonderful additions to our daily lives and offer us the opportunity to witness and participate in the wonderment of our very own food production right outside our front door!