



Growing Vegetables & Herbs in Containers

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The University of Maryland Extension's ongoing initiative "Grow It Eat It" is committed to helping Marylanders improve health and save money by growing fresh vegetables, fruits and herbs using sustainable practices. You may be intrigued by the idea of growing your own vegetables but may not have a yard or may be overwhelmed by the whole idea of starting an in ground vegetable garden. Well here's an idea for you.....let's grow vegetables in containers!

There are many advantages to growing food in containers. You'll need very few tools, there is no 'real' digging involved and you can put the containers right outside your door for easy access. Plus growing vegetables in containers requires much less time to care for than their in ground friends.

So let's get started. All outdoor containers must have a drainage hole and be large enough to hold sufficient soil for plants to root securely and supply moisture and nutrients for growth. For vegetables specifically, size matters! Generally, the bigger the pot the more successful the crop. It is also especially important to consider weight and stability if adding containers to balconies, decks and roof tops. Most vegetables require 6-8 hours of sunlight each day, an essential consideration when deciding placement of your container. Finally be sure to select a good quality potting soil, don't buy the cheapest and don't use soil from your garden.

So what should you grow? First decide what you like to eat. Then list the vegetables in order of preference, noting the final dimensions of the mature plant and the length of time it takes for the vegetables to mature. The time to maturity is the biggest factor when deciding what to grow and what to plant together. Depending on your inclination you can plant one type of vegetable in a pot, or mix different vegetables together or even include blooming annuals for added color and interest.

Some of the easiest vegetables to grow in containers are bush tomatoes, lettuces, radishes, shallots, peppers and eggplants. Start with seeds for fast growing crops such as lettuce and cucumbers. The seeds can be planted directly in the soil. For crops that require a longer time to mature like tomatoes, it is better to purchase the plants already started. As interest in vegetable gardening has grown, more garden centers and nurseries have a larger selection of vegetables from which to choose. When selecting specific varieties you will have greater success if you focus on bush, dwarf and compact varieties.

How to care for the plants? First and foremost regular watering is essential. When the weather is hot daily watering will likely be required. Vegetable plants will also require regular fertilizing. Generally vegetables grown in pots need more fertilizer than those grown in open ground. Slow maturing crops in containers need more fertilizer than fast. There are many kinds of prepackaged fertilizer available----some all purpose, some more specific applications. Be sure to follow all label directions. To help keep your plants healthy, remove dead leaves and other plant debris that is damaged by pest or disease. If you have mixed in flowering annuals in your pots, be sure to remove all spent blooms. Many plants will need support---especially climbing plants, even bush tomatoes and dwarf bean do better with some support.

Then at last, the joy of the harvest! If possible pick your vegetables in the morning when the sugar content is the highest. Enjoy and start making plans for next year.....more containers? A small in ground plot? The possibilities are endless!

For more information about horticulture or the Master Gardener Program in Frederick County, call the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County Office, 301-600-1596, or visit <http://www.frederick.umd.edu/>. Our mission is to educate Maryland residents about safe, effective and sustainable horticultural practices that build healthy gardens, landscapes and communities.

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