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Vegetable gardeners who do not have access to garden plots can still grow vegetables in containers. Although vegetable production will be limited by the number and the size of the containers, this form of gardening can be rewarding. The following suggestions can help you get maximum enjoyment and yields from container gardening.

Choosing a Location

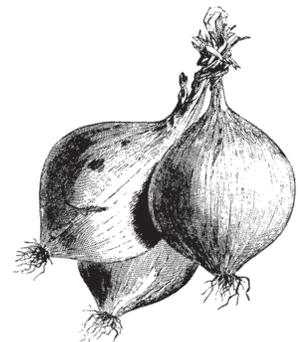
Most vegetables do well in direct sunlight. A southern exposure is best, but an eastern or western exposure is adequate if shading occurs only part of the day. Vegetable plants grown in full shade, whether on the north side of a building or near trees, probably will not produce well.

The patios and balconies of apartment buildings and condominiums often have good exposure for container vegetable gardening. Containers may be placed on patios and balconies, or even directly on the ground.

Choosing Containers

Large containers offer greater yield potential than small containers and do not need water as often. Also, plant growth and productivity can be influenced by the volume of soil or growing medium in a container—the larger the container, the more medium (and nutrients) available to the plant.

Possible containers include plastic or clay pots, wooden boxes, wooden or plastic baskets with plastic liners, trash cans, and Styrofoam picnic coolers. (Lightweight containers may need to be anchored or supported by a railing or other solid object to keep them from getting knocked over.) Containers can also be made by standing large clay tiles on end. When tiles are placed directly on soil, roots can continue their growth into the ground below the container. Vegetables can even be grown in hanging baskets if the volume of the basket is sufficient.



Gardeners should note that some plastics (including Styrofoam) become brittle and deteriorate if exposed to sunlight. Also, be sure to avoid using wood that has been treated with a preservative that might injure plants or contaminate vegetables.

Adequate drainage of excess water is essential to successful container gardening; be sure containers are not watertight. If necessary, drill or punch holes in the bottom or lower sides of a container for drainage. A 1-inch layer of coarse gravel or crushed rock in the bottom of the container also aids drainage. Setting containers on small blocks to allow air flow beneath them will also aid drainage and may slow rotting of wooden or rusting of metal container bottoms.

Preparing Growing Media

Many soils need to be modified before they can be used successfully in containers. This is frequently done by mixing equal parts of soil, peat or peat moss, and perlite. If sand is available, a mix can be made of equal parts of soil, sand, and peat moss. Garden centers carry soilless media made up of peat moss and vermiculite that are free of insects, weeds, and diseases. These media can be mixed half and half with soil for container gardening. A medium should drain well and yet have good moisture retention.

Vegetable Types and Cultivars

In general, small-to-medium vegetable types and cultivars (varieties) are more suited to containers than large, vigorous types. This means that leaf lettuce, radishes, spinach, carrots, beans, or herbs would do better in containers than would sweet corn, watermelons, squash, or pumpkins. For some types of vegetables, such as tomatoes, cultivars have been developed especially for containers or small gardens.

Caring for Container Gardens

You will need to check your container garden frequently to be sure it has enough water and fertilizer. Containers with large plants will dry out quickly in hot weather and may need to be watered every day. Add enough water so that some runs out of the bottom of the container after each watering. If your containers are on a balcony, be sure that excess water does not drip onto lower balconies or patios. Large plants may need to be trellised, staked, or supported to keep them from falling over.

If the lower leaves of your vegetables begin to turn yellow in spite of regular watering, the plants may need more nutrients. Add approximately one teaspoon of a complete garden fertilizer (8-8-8 or 10-10-10) to each container to supply additional nutrients. Garden stores carry a wide range of water-soluble and slow-release organic fertilizers in addition to typical chemical fertilizers. Follow the recommendations on the package for rates and frequency of application.

Vegetables growing in containers can be affected by the same diseases and insects found in gardens. You may be able to control insect infestations by hand-removing and destroying the pests. If you choose to use pesticides, whether natural or synthetic, be sure to use them only when needed and according to the directions on the label.

Harvest your vegetables when they are at the desired maturity. Have someone else harvest the vegetables if you are going to be gone when they reach their peak. Plants will be more productive if overmature fruit and plant parts are removed regularly.

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