

Container gardens are easy to grow

By Jodi Schneider
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The weather's warming up, and now may be the perfect time to start a garden.

Gardening is a relaxing recreational activity that can provide great personal rewards. During this time, when many people are working at home and students are learning at home, gardening can be a positive family activity to adopt.

For beginners looking to start gardening with small patio spaces or a deck to grow on, container gardening is the way to go. All you need is the right size container, potting soil, plants, and slow-release fertilizer.

Almost anything can function as a container, from an old wheelbarrow to a galvanized tin bucket. The beauty of container gardening is that it allows you to be creative, and if you have a big enough container you can grow just about anything.

Besides having pots, tubs, and half barrels overflowing with flowers, container gardening can serve a practical purpose, too. Gardeners limited to a balcony or other small areas can produce a wide variety of vegetable crops in containers.

Since going to the grocery store during these trying times can feel like an act of desperation, why not cut down on hours spent braving masked lines and spend more time planting your own "Pandemic Victory Garden" in your own safe area? A "Victory Garden" was a home vegetable garden, planted to increase food production during wartime.

It's important to decide what edible plant you want to grow in each container. Several factors help determine how large and deep the container must be. Consider the size and shape of a plant's root system; whether it is a perennial, annual, or shrub; and how rapidly it grows.

If you want your plants to grow healthy and provide an abundance of fruit, then you have to make sure the container you plant them in is large enough. Large containers hold more soil, which stays moist longer and resists rapid temperature fluctuations.

Whatever container you choose, drainage holes are essential. Without drainage, soil will become waterlogged and plants may die. There must be enough drainage where excess water can drain out.

Here are a few suggestions on what kind of containers you can choose from: clay or terracotta containers are attractive but breakable and easily damaged by freezing and thawing.

Wooden containers, especially raised bed containers, are beautiful in gardens. Wood is natural-looking and protects roots from rapid temperature swings. You can build wooden planters yourself. Choose a naturally rot-resistant wood such as cedar or locust, or use pine treated with a preservative.

Plastic and fiberglass pots and planters are lightweight, relatively inexpensive, and available in many sizes and shapes.

If your container seems too deep, you can put a layer of gravel or styrofoam in the bottom to reduce the amount of potting soil required.

Since containers are heavy once they are filled with soil, decide where they will be located and move them into position before filling and planting.

To give your container-grown crops the best home possible, start out by selecting the right soil to fill your pots. Plain garden soil is too dense for container gardening. For containers up to 1 gallon in size, use a houseplant soil mixture. For larger containers, use a relatively coarse soilless planting mixture to maintain the needed water and air balance. Think of the potting soil for your container garden as the foundational

nourishment those plants will have. Try to invest in a high-quality organic potting soil from a local greenhouse or nursery.

Soil-containing or soilless potting mixes offer all of these features. Potting mixes are filled with organic matter such as peat moss, compost and bark chips to provide nutrients and a good pH balance for your plants. Look for mixes with vermiculite or perlite, which help aerate the soil and retain moisture. Any mixes without vermiculite should be saved for herbs, which won't wither if they go dry occasionally. For large pots that may need to be moved, choose soilless mixes since they are light. Because potting mixes have been heated during processing, they are free of weed seeds, pests and disease.

One tip is to pre-moisten soil either by watering it before you fill containers or by flooding the containers with water several times and stirring. Be sure the soil is uniformly moist before planting.

You will also need to fertilize your plants. Once plants are established, usually fertilize your plants every two weeks to help keep them fed and growing strong all season long.



PHOTO BY JODI SCHNEIDER

Mix herbs together as barbecue blend of thyme, rosemary, and oregano.

Almost any vegetable, flower, herb, shrub, or small tree can grow successfully in a container.

You can grow vegetables in individual containers — from large pots to five-gallon buckets or half barrels, the largest of which will accommodate a single tomato plant or several smaller vegetables such as broccoli or cabbage. Dwarf or bush forms of larger vegetables such as tomatoes, pumpkins, and winter squash are most suited to container gardening.

Theme gardens also are fun to try. Plant a salad garden with colorful lettuces, dwarf tomatoes, chives, and parsley. Maybe try a pizza garden, with different types of basil, plus tomatoes and peppers.

There are endless

possibilities when it comes to container gardening that can range from a few simple and affordable containers to complex and more expensive systems. Before you get started, it's a good idea to brainstorm what your ideal container garden would look like.

Some herbs that grow great in containers are: basil, oregano, cilantro, tarragon, thyme, lavender, rosemary, dill and parsley.

Vegetables include eggplant, peppers, pole beans, spinach, lettuce, swiss chard, cherry tomatoes, vine tomatoes (hanging), strawberries, radishes, scallions, beets and zucchini.

You will love being able to just walk out onto your deck and snip fresh lettuce, herbs, and garden grown tomatoes to use for dinner.

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