Diggin' in The Dirt: Growing Vegetables in Containers

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The OSU Extension office is closed to face-to-face public contact but you can still reach us!
All of us (faculty and staff) will still be working (mostly out of the office), answering phone calls left on our answering machines, email messages (chip.bubl@oregonstate.edu), writing newspaper columns and newsletters, and working to develop programs that can reach you online. We are really committed to helping our communities in any way we can, especially in our areas of subject matter expertise (farming, gardening, forestry, food, food safety, and nutrition, healthy decision-making, and youth education) and any other way we can enrich your life and/or make you safer in these challenging times. Please do not hesitate to contact us! And please, take all steps necessary to ensure that you and your loved ones are safe.

Pressure gauge testing: We have, for years, tested the pressure gauges of home canning equipment. They should be checked periodically to make sure food that needs to be pressured canned to avoid botulism gets the right treatment. We plan to set up a couple of days to do the testing. If you are interested, contact Jenny Rudolph at our office and she will email you the date(s) and time when we will be doing that. Her email is Jenny.rudolph@oregonstate.edu.

Here are some free classes:
• **Free online OSU vegetable gardening class:** https://workspace.oregonstate.edu/course/master-gardener-series-vegetable-gardening
• **Free online beginning OSU/Food Bank vegetable gardening class ("Seed to Supper"):** https://www.oregonfoodbank.org/our-work/programs/education/gardening/

Growing vegetables in containers

Peppers like warm roots. Given happy roots and otherwise normal care, they produce abundantly. So do eggplants and tomatoes. One way to improve root temperatures is to plant these vegetables in containers.

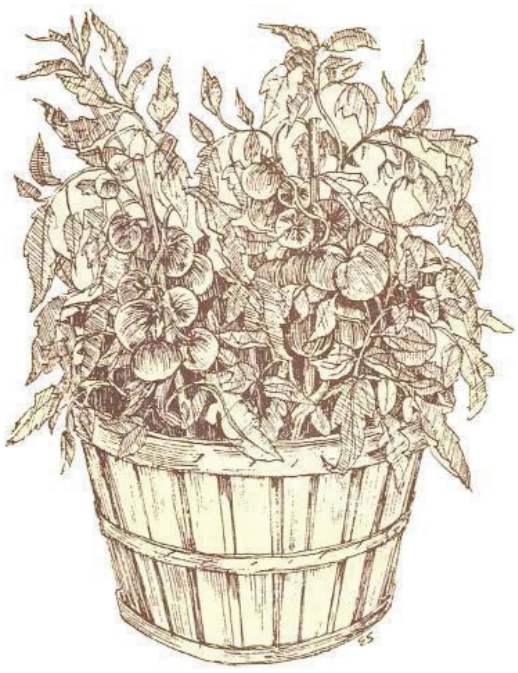
The planted containers should be placed where they get a decent amount of sun. Eight hours or more is best. Make sure it is easy to water them since containers may dry out more quickly than garden planted vegetables.

Another advantage is that if you have limited space in which to garden, putting these plants on patios or decks can add quite a bit to your total home vegetable production. We have a lot of people in South County that live in floating homes. Those are perfect for container gardening. Some intrepid aquatic gardeners create holes where the pots and plant roots are in Multnomah channel and are watered naturally.

Besides tomatoes, peppers, and eggplants you can grow lettuce and other greens (they like wider but shallower pots), radishes, carrots, cilantro and basil, potatoes and many other vegetables. Pole beans grow well if you build a trellis. So do cucumbers and snap peas which need a smaller trellis. Even a zucchini will perform well in a large container.

One other value of containers is putting them where the deer can't destroy your vegetables.

There are drawbacks, though, to containers. First, they need more attentive watering as noted above. And on very hot afternoons, it may be wise to pull them back into shade around 3 pm to reduce the risk of sunburn.



Second, some plants need to be staked and tied (peppers) or trained in a structure (tomatoes). Staking isn't too hard in containers but getting or building a stable and large enough tomato cage that won't topple over in a container is a challenge.

Third, soil straight from your garden doesn't work well in containers, at least as the only material in pots. Clay-rich soil has very small pore spaces and so it drains slowly which can lead to waterlogged roots that lack oxygen and poor growth. Most university publications advise against using garden soil.

But it is expensive to buy potting mix for containers. There is a minority opinion that says it is possible to mix good garden loam (with moderate to low clay) with other materials for vegetable containers. I have seen it done with good results. The containers are heavier (so they are less likely to blow over) and seem to be able to go between watering slightly longer. But I need to repeat, don't use heavy clay soils either alone or in the mix or it will get waterlogged.

Here are several soil mix recipes for containers that use garden soil. One calls for equal parts by volume of garden loam (your best soil), good compost, and perlite. Another uses equal parts of potting mix, good soil, compost, and perlite. A final possible mix is equal parts peat moss or well-rotted compost; loamy garden soil; and clean, coarse builder's sand. With any of these mixes, you can add lime at about ¼ cup per four gallons of mix. Slow release organic or conventional fertilizers can also be added or the plants can be watered about every four days with a liquid fertilizer (organic or conventional) at about one-half strength.

Fourth, container shape and size influences how much water a container will hold and its potential for waterlogging toward the bottom of the pot. Two containers of equal volume, one that is 6 inches tall and wide and one that is 12 inches tall but narrow, drain differently. Both will have perched water at the same height from the bottom of the pot.

But with the low, wide container, 2" of water on the bottom represents 33% of its volume while the same two inches in the 12" container represents about only 16% of the volume. To prove this, take a six inch sponge and soak it, then first drain it on its side and measure the height that drains. Then soak again and drain it upright and it will drain to the same height. Anything we can do to reduce waterlogging will produce better plants.

Finally, if you use five-gallon buckets or other makeshift containers, drill holes in the bottom and about ½ inch along the side from the bottom to ensure decent drainage. Tomatoes and peppers need large, deep containers (at least 12 inches high and five gallons or more in volume) while lettuce can be planted in lower, wider containers of six-inches or so.

If you want some great practical gardening information, see *Grow Your Own*, an Oregon State University publication you can find online. If you have questions, please feel free to email me at chip.bubl@oregonstate.edu or call and leave a message for me at (503) 397-3462.

May you all be safe and have a wonderful garden year. Hope to be able to see you soon. Chip

Free newsletter (what a deal!)

The Oregon State University Extension office in Columbia County publishes a monthly newsletter on gardening and farming topics (called *Country Living*) written/edited by yours truly. All you need to do is ask for it and it will be mailed or emailed to you. Call (503) 397-3462 to be put on the list. Alternatively, you can find it on the web at http://extension.oregonstate.edu/columbia/ and click on newsletters.

Take excess produce to the food bank, senior centers, or community meals programs. Cash donations to buy food are also greatly appreciated.

The Extension Service offers its programs and materials equally to all people.

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