

VEGETABLES IN CONTAINERS



You can raise just about any crop in a pot. And growing vegetables in containers is a good solution for many gardening challenges. A pot or two (or a window box) can fit in the smallest spaces—even narrow balconies—and in shady places they can be moved to stay in the sunlight as it shifts during the season. Container gardens can be positioned so that people of all abilities can tend them. They need little if any weeding and the harvesting is easy.

Here's how to get started raising food in containers.

Picking Pots

The basic requirement for containers is drainage holes so excess water can flow out. Soggy soil causes vegetable plants to rot. You can choose just about any material and style that you like. You can save money and recycle food-grade plastic buckets from restaurants and other professional kitchens with holes punched in them. Terra cotta and ceramic pots are more attractive, as are wooden half barrels. You can find nice plastic containers in lots of colors, shapes, and looks, too. Consider the weight of the pot when it's full, especially if you will be moving it around. Wood, terra cotta, and ceramic are much heavier than plastic. **Grow bags are a newer option.** The sturdy, woven containers, sold by many garden centers or online garden suppliers, are very light but shouldn't be moved when full. They are especially easy to store during the off-season.

For top-heavy crops like tomatoes, peppers, and cucumbers, pick pots that hold at least 10 gallons of soil. Greens and root crops (such as carrots and radishes) can fit into just about any container with at least 10 inches of soil below the surface.

Soil Mix

Because drainage is so critical, vegetable containers need a soil mix that is loose and light. Ordinary garden soil is too dense for containers. Look for bags of potting soil mix that include either sphagnum moss or coir (a by-product of coconut processing), vermiculite or perlite (minerals that absorb and disperse moisture), and compost or worm castings. Steer clear of potting soil with blue or green synthetic fertilizers mixed in—those plant foods stimulate unhealthy growth and may be harmful to the environment. It's better to give your crops healthy organic fertilizers yourself.

When you fill your pots with soil, leave at least 2 to 3 inches below the rim so that you can water without overflowing the container.

Best Varieties

Many vegetable varieties that have been bred specifically for container growing are now available. Look in the descriptions for words like "dwarf," "patio," "bush," and "compact habit" when choosing varieties.

Lettuce and Other Greens

Go with loose-leaf or other types of lettuces that let you "cut and come again" rather than iceberg or bibb, which produce one head and then are finished. Just about any variety of spinach and arugula works in containers. You can make an attractive pot or hanging basket with mesclun mix or your own choice of salad greens with different colors and textures. The red and yellow stalks and deep green leaves of 'Bright Lights' Swiss chard are striking in containers.

Tomatoes, Peppers, and Eggplant

Go for "determinate" tomato varieties, which reach a modest maximum height and stop growing. For the smallest plant, try 'Micro Tom'—it tops out at about 8 inches high. Sweet peppers 'Lady Bell', 'Gypsy' and 'New Ace' and spicy 'Numex' and 'Shisito' varieties fare well in containers. 'Dusky' and 'Little Finger' eggplant bear small- to medium-size fruit on plants that grow to about 2 feet tall.



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Best Varieties cont.

Cucumbers and Squash

Even container-size varieties of these vining crops need either room to spread out or a large pot with a small trellis set up. 'Boothby Blond', 'Patio Snacker' and 'Salad Bush' cucumbers stay relatively compact. Pattypan -type summer squashes are smaller and lighter than other kinds.

Carrots, Radishes, Beets, and Turnips

'Tom Thumb' and other short, stubby "Chantenay" carrot varieties reach their full size and sweetness in a container. You can plant almost any variety of radishes, beets, and turnips, but be sure to leave enough room between them for the roots to develop.

Broccoli, Cauliflower, and Cabbage

Look for compact and fast-maturing varieties of these cabbage family members. 'Royal Tenderette Hybrid' broccoli produces several thin 3- to 4-inch stalks that each produce a floret, rather than one thick stalk with a head. 'White Corona' cauliflower matures in as few as 35 days and produces tight heads that measure about 8 inches across. 'Jersey Wakefield' yields medium-size heads of green cabbage. 'Red' Ball' is a compact red cabbage.

Mixing different vegetables into one container can make it both visually appealing and productive. Be sure to leave enough room between plants to allow for them to reach their mature size—overcrowding stunts growth, reduces yields, and can lead to disease problems.

Simple Care

Watering

Vegetables grow best when they have consistent moisture. Plants in containers can't draw on water stored in the ground, so you need to check on them each day. Push your finger into the soil up to your second knuckle. If it feels completely dry, soak the soil around the plants (*rather than the leaves*) until water runs out the bottom hole. During the peak of summer, you may need to water vegetable plants every day. **Always check first** so you don't overwater and drown your crops. Morning is the best time to water, but evenings work, too.

Feeding

Just as with water, container crops can't draw up nutrients from the soil, so you need to provide them. Liquid fish and seaweed fertilizer (*Neptune's Harvest and Alaska are widely available brands*) is a balanced plant food that's natural and safe for plants and other living things. Be sure to follow the recommendations for amounts on the label—overfertilizing is harmful for plants and the environment. **Feed your plants weekly**, gradually increasing the concentration as they grow.

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