



Big Green Idea Sheet: Container Vegetables

Growing you own vegetables

We are constantly being told that we should eat five good portions of fruit and vegetables every day to remain fit and healthy. Ideally many of us would like these products to be both organic and sourced locally - both of which can help reduce oil and chemical usage. However it is often difficult to find fresh, locally produced organic fruit and vegetables that are affordable for everybody.

There is an alternative: growing your own fruit and vegetables! Whilst many people do this already in their back gardens and on allotments, what can you do if you don't have a garden? For example if you live in a flat or a rented property where you aren't allowed to garden? The solution is simple: many vegetables can be grown in containers on patios, balconies and even window sills.

What sort of containers?

Plants aren't too fussy about what sort of container they are in as long as you follow some basic rules - after all they don't know if you've recycled a plastic tub or bought a £50 terracotta pot! They have some simple requirements:

- ◆ Enough soil or compost in the container to allow them to grow a reasonable root system,
- ◆ Drainage holes in the bottom so that they don't drown when watered,
- ◆ Clean pots so that diseases don't spread to new seedlings,
- ◆ A reasonably sunny position so that the plant can get some light.

Assuming you can provide all of these and give the plants regular watering and the odd spot of plant food, they should repay you with a good crop for you to eat.

If you've got a window sill...

Window sills are great for growing herbs such as basil, oregano, chives and parsley. You can also grow some salad leaves as

long as the window sill does not get too hot. Chillies, compact tomato plants and even aubergines can all be successfully grown indoors. Just bear in mind that plants can get quite big in some cases - you don't want to block all the light out of your room!

If you have a small balcony...

On a small balcony you can grow everything you can grow on a window sill plus make use of some climbing plants, such as some varieties of peas, french beans, runner beans and compact outdoor cucumbers. If you can get some deep containers (at least 1 foot/30cm deep) you can grow some root vegetables such as carrots, beetroot and baby turnips. Onions, leeks and garlic are also possibilities.

A couple of things to bear in mind with balconies. Firstly how windy does it get? A really windy site will need to have the containers securely fixed down and the plants staked so that they don't end up flying across the road! Secondly how much light does it really get? For example some balconies overlook enclosed courtyards, and might only get a couple of hours of sun per day. In these cases aim for the leafy salad vegetables as they can tolerate more shade than other veggies.

Out on the patio...

All the things mentioned above can be grown successfully on a patio. Other options include potatoes in buckets or even old compost bags (punch holes in either of these for drainage, start half full of compost and then fill up with more compost as the plants grow), courgettes (one plant per large tub as these can really spread out!) and parsnips (in long pipes or old chimney pots). If you want to be really adventurous you could even try jerusalem artichokes in a large pot - these grow over 6 feet tall, provide flowers similar to sunflowers and then tubers that you can cook like potatoes that you can harvest in midwinter.

If you've got a rented garden...

If you rent your property and are not



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allowed to dig out new vegetable beds, you can use any of the container growing tips given above. You might also be able to site containers, and possibly plant directly, in the flower borders of your garden. Many common vegetables were originally introduced into the UK as ornamental plants so can fit in quite nicely amongst the existing flowers and shrubs. For example runner beans, with attractive red, white or purple flowers, and some even having coloured stems, look as nice as any sweet pea.

Compost

Whilst plants can grow in garden soil (and do if you're planting straight into the ground), most people use compost in their containers. Compost is simply well rotted organic matter. You can make compost yourself if you have room for a compost bin outside or can house a wormery (see the info sheets on these two subjects for more information). Alternatively compost is widely available pre-bagged from most garden centres, DIY stores and even supermarkets.

There is often a wide range of compost types available for purchase. For the beginner it is best to pick a multi purpose type compost, preferably a peat-free organic one. Peat usage in commercial composts can be environmentally damaging and should be avoided if possible.

When sowing seeds, it is often preferable to mix the basic compost with some sharp sand or small grit as this helps with drainage and stops the seeds and seedlings rotting.

Watering and feeding

One important thing to bear in mind is that most container grown veggies need a regular and plentiful supply of water. If you forget to water for a week or so you may find that the plants' growth will be slowed, fruits may be damaged or in some cases the plants will just die. On the other hand be careful not to overwater plants - standing in a bog can be just as offputting

for the plants as standing in a desert!

Many container grown plants (salad leaves being a notable exception) will exhaust the nutrients in the compost after a few weeks and will need to be fed. You can buy organic liquid feeds and fertilizers. If you are worried you'll forget or overlook feeding the plants, you can also get slow release fertilizers that you mix in with the compost at the start and that can then feed the plants for a whole season. Just check that it is organic!

Pests and diseases

Container grown plants are usually quite healthy, as they are not subjected to the soil borne pests and diseases that plants grown in the ground can suffer from. However they can still attract some problems. White fly is a common problem which can be attacked by either wiping the flies off by hand or spraying diluted washing up liquid over the leaves. Slugs and snails will also love your plants. Little jars of stale beer can be used to trap and drown them, or you can nip out in the evening with a torch and catch them in the act!

Fruit growing in containers

It's not just vegetables that can be grown in pots - you can grow many types of fruit as well. In small spaces strawberries are an obvious choice. You can get special strawberry planters that have "pockets" up the sides for strawberry plants to grow in, but they are just as happy in normal pots.

Berry bushes such as blueberry, raspberry, blackberries and currants can also be grown in pots - just check the variety to make sure that it is fairly compact (or "dwarf" as it is known in the gardening trade). For larger spaces you can even buy apple, pear, cherry or peach trees that are grown in large pots. Again just ask in your local garden centre or look on the web for suitable varieties.

Enjoy your fruit and veg!

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