

Gardening In Small Spaces (published 2026-05-02)
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Increasingly many people live in homes with yards unsuitable for traditional gardening. There are means to grow some vegetables and attractive plants if they receive a minimum of 6 hours of direct sunlight. However, most vegetables do better with longer periods of sunlight. Thus, if possible, locate your vegetable garden in south-facing locations that are shade-free for at least 6 hours.

The easiest way for most small gardens would be to use containers. Any sort of container, if it has drainage holes will work. Even old buckets will work. If the container lacks drainage holes it is likely that the soil will become waterlogged and root rot will develop.

Virtually anything including vegetables, herbs, flowers, and even small fruit trees can be grown in containers. Several friends grow various varieties of fig trees in containers. They put them outside after the last frost in spring and take them inside to locations like the garage or basement before the first frost in autumn. Herbs such as basil, thyme and parsley are very suitable for growing in containers. If you grow mint do so in containers to prevent it from taking over the garden area, which it does using its rhizomes and runners. Other herbs that do well in containers include rosemary, oregano, chives, and cilantro.

Containers are available in a variety of different materials. Plants that prefer growing in drier soil like rosemary and thyme do well in clay pots. Plants that like warm temperatures like sweet potatoes, and hot peppers do well in metal containers. It is possible to get fabric containers and the advantage to these is that you can empty the containers into compost, clean the bags and store them indoors for reuse.

Deep rooted vegetables like eggplants, tomatoes, peppers, carrots, and parsnips should be grown in pots that are at least 12 inches deep, but preferably even deeper. Shallow rooted vegetables like lettuce, radishes, spinach, basil, Swiss chard, and parsley can be grown in containers that are six to twelve inches deep.

When growing tomatoes in containers it is recommended to grow dwarf varieties such as Rosella Purple, Dwarf Sweet Sue, Uluru Ochre, Rosella Crimson, and Summer Sweet Gold. Some examples of dwarf sweet peppers are Sweet Pickle, Sweet Banana, and Fushimi and if you want a hot pepper, try Early Jalapeno. The best eggplant to grow in containers is Patio Baby.

It is important to use a good quality potting mix, not garden soil. Good quality potting soils are designed for drainage and aeration which are required by the roots. Typically, they contain coconut coir, perlite, vermiculite and/or peat moss. Coconut coir is collected by taking bark from coconut trees and is the preferred material as it is an easily renewable resource compared to peat moss. Peat moss is another material used in potting mixes. However, it is not recommended. Peat moss stores about a third of the world's soil carbon more than all the forests combined. When the moss is harvested it releases this carbon into the atmosphere adding carbon dioxide thus, significantly impacting climate change. Good potting soil also contains perlite or vermiculite.

These ensure aeration and drainage plus are good quality materials which support the microorganisms and fungi that alter soil minerals into forms absorbable and useable by the plants. It is important to also add sources of nutrients. Such as compost or worm castings, and organic fertilizers like blood meal and bone meal.

Watering is key to good container gardening and may be required more than once a week. This is especially true in hot summer weather. Keep the soil moist but avoid overwatering.

With these basics any home can have a great garden.

Resources

“Growing Vegetables in Mini Gardens,”

<https://www.tnstate.edu/extension/documents/growingvegetablesinminigardenscontainers.pdf>

“Container Vegetable Gardening - Four Keys to Success,” <https://extension.psu.edu/container-vegetable-gardening-four-keys-to-success>

“Growing Vegetables in Containers,”

<https://extension.umd.edu/resource/growing-vegetables-containers/>

For more information about gardening, visit UTHORT’s YouTube site for helpful videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjS3d1IklH1OZ1Z2qPvhgfQ>

Or Washington County’s YouTube site:

<https://www.youtube.com/@utextensionwashingtoncounty>

How do I ask a question?

If you have questions for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

The Master Gardener Program is offered by the University of Tennessee Extension. The purpose of the Master Gardener program is to train people as horticultural-educated volunteers. These volunteers work in partnership with the local Extension office in their counties to expand educational outreach, providing home gardeners with researched-based information.