

SOMETIMES THERE'S a perfect storm in the garden trends world. Consider container gardening and edibles. Edible gardening continues to be popular, holding steady with an average of 30 million households participating in vegetable gardening over the last five years, according to the National Gardening Association's Gardening Survey. The two largest demographic groups who participate in gardening are baby boomers and millennials. Many millennials, however, opt to live in apartments, condos, or townhouses that offer little access to garden space. And many baby boomers are downsizing their gardens. Container gardening is a great

Potted Edibles

No space for a vegetable patch? No problem! Grow garden-fresh produce in containers on your porch, deck, patio, or balcony.

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHARLIE NARDOZZI

solution for anyone with limited space. Add the introduction of more dwarf vegetable, fruit, and herb varieties as well as edibles that are as attractive as they are tasty, and you can see why growing edibles in containers makes a lot of sense.

NEW CONTAINERS

When I first started gardening, the container choices were usually clay or flimsy green plastic pots. A lot has changed. By using containers made from a variety of different materials, you can match your pot with plants, furniture, even house siding. And these containers no longer just sit on the ground. Vertical gardening has elevated the pot experience to railings, walls, and ceilings.

I always try to match the right pot material with the appropriate edible plant. For example, clay pots are known to breathe and dry out easily. For these, I grow edibles such as thyme, oregano, rosemary, beans, and okra that thrive in slightly drier



Gardeners who have limited space can use fabric grow bags such as this one, which accommodates purple kale and flat-leaf parsley, and can be folded flat for storage in winter.

soil. If you want to add a modern touch to your container garden, try galvanized metal containers. These containers bake in the sun so grow heat-loving veggies such as watermelons, sweet potatoes, and hot peppers in them. For veggies that like evenly moist soil, such as tomatoes, basil, squash, and broccoli, self-watering containers are

an excellent option. For space-crunched gardeners who don't have room to store lots of containers in winter, consider grow bags. Made from a fleecelike, polypropylene fabric, these bags come in a variety of sizes. To store, simply compost the potting soil, clean and fold up the bags, and stack them in a closet or basement.



Dwarf 'Goodhearted' tomatoes, interplanted with edible nasturtiums, ripen in a glazed pot. Many dwarf and compact varieties of tomatoes—as well as other popular vegetables such as eggplants and cucumbers—are well suited to container culture.

Match your container's depth to the plant's expected root growth. For example, deeply-rooted vegetables, such as eggplant and tomatoes, should be grown in pots one to two feet deep. Shallow rooted vegetables, such as lettuce, radishes, beets and onions, can be grown in shallower containers.

Some containers, namely those made of a material such as terra cotta that absorbs water may crack if exposed to freezing temperatures. These should be emptied of soil in the fall and stored in a protected area.

VEGGIES TO GROW IN POTS

But enough about containers, let's talk

plants. Some of the easiest vegetables and herbs for a container garden—the ones that will give you the biggest bang for your buck—include greens, such as lettuce, arugula, and Swiss chard; specialty peppers; radishes and beets, dwarf tomatoes; and herbs such as basil, oregano, and rosemary. Although a bit trickier, some

fruit can be grown in containers as well, for details, see the sidebar on page 16.

The easiest container planting technique is to grow a single type of edible in each pot. A container of greens for salad-making, a potted cherry tomato for snacking, and a lush bush zucchini for summer grilling provides an attractive threesome of productive containers. This technique works particularly well for large vegetable and herb plants as long as you have the space. Multiple containers may be a problem if you have a small deck, balcony, or porch and limited sun.

Small veggies and herbs, such as parsley and lettuce, fit easily in a 12- to 14-inch-diameter container. Peppers, basil, cucumbers and beans are best grown in a slightly larger container. Large plants—tomatoes, bush squash, broccoli, and eggplant—and combinations of vegetables and herbs grow best in containers 18 inches in diameter or larger. Of course, the larger the container, the heavier it will be to move around, so consider where you'll be growing it. In particular, consider the weight of your containers with wet potting soil if you are growing on a balcony or second-story porch where the combined weight of several large pots may create a structural hazard.

To keep the plants, and size of the pots, manageable, select some of newer bush versions of large vegetables. One program, the Dwarf Tomato Breeding Project, spearheaded by Craig LeHoullier of Raleigh, North Carolina, has been developing dwarf indeterminate tomato plants that produce full-sized fruits all season on just three- to four-foot-tall plants. For more information about these varieties, see "The Worldwide Dwarf Tomato Project" in the January/February 2016 issue of this magazine.

Another way to approach container design is to grow vegetable-and-herb combination pots. Match vegetables and herbs with complementary space needs. Plant a tall-growing bell pepper, leek, celery or rosemary in the center of a container with trailing nasturtiums, oregano, or strawberries along the edge. Or plant vegetables with similar water and temperature needs, such as a container of greens filled with arugula, lettuce, kale, and parsley.

GROW SEASONALLY WITH EDIBLES

Another way to look at your container garden is to match the seasonality of your vegetables and herbs and create succession



Top: Growing one plant per pot ensures each has room to spread. **Above:** In this spring pot, rosemary shares space with cool-season lettuce and pansies that can be replaced in summer with warm-season plants such as Swiss chard and nasturtiums.



This culinary-themed container brimming with rosemary, eggplant, Swiss chard, and golden thyme has all the makings of a Mediterranean-inspired menu.

plantings. In spring, plant quick-maturing pak choi, dwarf peas, arugula, and mesclun greens. Pull these plants out in early summer and plant heat-loving bush beans, cucumbers, and basil. Come fall, go back to cool-weather crops, such as kale, parsley, spinach, and radishes. In warm regions of the country, you can keep this succession going by replanting cool-season veggies and herbs in winter for a spring harvest.

“Paring down” is another space-saving approach for growing container veggies. Start with multiple veggies in one pot that

mature at different times. Grow a tomato or eggplant in a container flanked by lettuce, pansies, and cilantro. You’ll harvest the lettuce, flowers, and cilantro long before the tomato or eggplant gets big enough to shade them and take over.

A WORD ABOUT GROWING

While all this talk of fresh, homegrown produce may have your mouth watering, container growing does require special attention. Here are a few tips that will increase the success of your container edible garden:

Sources

Johnny’s Selected Seeds, Albion, ME. www.johnnyseeds.com.

Territorial Seed Company, Cottage Grove, OR. www.territorialseed.com.

Victory Seed Company, Molalla, OR. www.victoryseeds.com.

W. Atlee Burpee Seed Company, Warminster, PA. www.burpee.com.

Resources

Container Gardening Complete: Creative Projects for Growing Vegetables and Flowers in Small Spaces by Jessica Walliser. Cool Springs Press, Brentwood, TN, 2017.

Container Vegetable Gardening: Growing Crops in Pots in Every Space by Liz Dobbs and Anne Halpin. Companion House Books, East Petersburg, PA, 2019.

McGee & Stuckey’s Bountiful Container: Create Container Gardens of Vegetables, Herbs, Fruits, and Edible Flowers by Maggie Stuckey and Rose Marie Nichols McGee. Workman Publishing Company, New York, NY, 2002.

Northeast Fruit & Vegetable Gardening: Plant, Grow, and Eat the Best Edibles for Northeast Gardens by Charlie Nardozzi. Cool Springs Press, Brentwood, TN, 2012.

- Most vegetables and herbs grow best in full sun in an area protected from wind and cold. That being said, leafy greens and root crops can grow in part shade and still give you a good harvest.

- Reuse old potting soil if your plants weren’t disease or insect-infested the previous year. Remove the top six inches of soil and compost it. Refresh the container between each planting with new potting soil and mix it in well with the old.

- Large containers get heavy. Consider purchasing containers with built-in casters or use caddies under your pots so you can easily move them around. These work best on flat tile, concrete, and stone surfaces.

- Don’t forget about vertical spaces to maximize planting space off the ground. Use wall garden kits to grow lettuce and herbs. Railing and deck planters are great

GROW FRUIT IN CONTAINERS, TOO

Many fruit trees and berry bushes come in dwarf forms that allow you to grow apples, peaches, and blueberries in containers on a high-rise balcony or a backyard deck. Columnar apples trees, such as 'North Pole', only grow eight feet tall with stubby branches. Fruits form along the trunk and branches making this small tree perfect for container growing. There are self-fruitful, dwarf peaches, such as 'El Dorado', and cherry trees, such as 'Dwarf Northstar', that will fruit in large containers with a little extra care, even in cold climates. And there's my prized 'Brown Turkey' fig trees that I maintain at a manageable six feet tall in large containers; they produce delicious fresh figs every summer even in Vermont. Even if you live in a climate where fig trees grow in the ground, planting them in containers is an excellent way to keep the trees dwarf and easier to maintain.

Fruits grow best in larger containers—20 inches or more in diameter. Since these are perennial crops, use a potting mix that features compost. This will help with nutrient absorption and water retention.

While tree fruits are fun to imagine, berries are probably more practical for the novice container fruit grower. There are a host of new varieties of blueberries and brambles that grow and fruit well in containers. The Bushel and Berry® series features varieties such as 'Blueberry Glaze' and 'Jelly Bean'—blueberries that stay two to three feet tall and wide and produce tasty berries. The edibles I'm most impressed with, though, are container brambles. Blackberries, such as 'Baby Cakes', and raspberries, such as 'Raspberry Shortcake' are summer producers that can be planted right outside your kitchen door. Everbearing and alpine strawberries are excellent trailing plants in mixed containers combining well with tall eggplants, okra, or Brussels sprouts.

Of course, fruit trees and berries grown in containers often need winter protection. The roots of container-grown plants experience more alternate freezing and thawing than those grown in the ground, which can cause even a hardy fruit tree to perish. In cold-winter climates, place deciduous fruit containers in a basement, garage, or other location where the temperatures stay between 25 and 50 degrees Fahrenheit in winter. In regions with milder winters, place containers in a spot where they are protected from north and west winds. For more insulation, you can wrap the tree in burlap and fill it with leaves or straw.

Evergreens, such as citrus, should be kept in a sunny, cool spot, but should not be exposed to freezing temperatures. Deciduous plants such as apples will go dormant in winter, tolerating some freezing weather, which also provides the winter chilling they need to produce fruit, depending on the fruit and variety. Come late winter, when the plant's natural internal clock tells it to start growing, move plants to a sunnier location, still protected from the late-winter cold.

—C.N.



'Brown Turkey' fig can be grown successfully in containers.

for dwarf carrots, radishes, greens, and trailing plants such as oregano. Climbing pole beans, peas, or cucumbers can be grown vertically up a trellis, leaving space for trailers around the container's edges. Grow new varieties of dwarf tomatoes, such as 'Lizzano', in hanging baskets to produce cherry-sized fruits all summer.

■ Containers need consistent watering, so make sure you place them close to a water source for hand watering. Drip irrigation lines and self-watering containers help reduce the effort required. Use the finger test to know when to water: if you can poke your finger into the soil and it's dry to the knuckle, water. On sunny, hot days, you may be watering a few times a day. Of course, the larger the container, the longer you can go between waterings.

■ Since containers are mostly filled with potting soil and perhaps some compost, you'll have to stay on top of fertilizing. I like using an organic granular fertilizer in spring with a side dressing in midsummer for long season, large veggies such as tomatoes and eggplants. It slowly releases nutrients during the growing season. A time-release fertilizer will also work. However, I also find that periodic additions of a liquid fertilizer, such as fish emulsion or compost tea, helps keep plants growing strong.

■ Keep picking. Harvest the outer leaves of greens to keep the growth point producing new leaves. Pick cucumbers, squash, and beans on the young side to encourage more production. Cut back herbs periodically to encourage fresh flushes of new growth.

■ Be merciless with pest-infested plants. Check frequently for pests; if they get out of hand, yank the plant. It's better to pop in something else than to struggle with a vegetable that's just limping along.

Now is a great time to begin planning your edible container garden. Choose containers that are both attractive and efficient. Select the crops you most like eating fresh and choose varieties suited to container culture. With a bit of TLC, you can enjoy fresh produce from your own garden all season—even if you don't have a yard.

Author of and contributor to several edible gardening books, Charlie Nardozzi lives in Burlington, Vermont, and frequently offers his expertise on television and radio gardening programs. He is also a member of this magazine's editorial advisory board.