

Growing Vegetables in Containers

There is nothing like freshly picked vegetables straight from your own garden to include with meals during the summer. For many American's growing their own vegetables in the ground is simply a dream for a variety of reasons however the demand for fresh, homegrown gardens increased dramatically over the last decade. For those who can't grow a garden in the ground there is still hope as container vegetable gardening is a rapidly expanding trend and now there are more varieties of our favorite vegetables available than ever before. Let's talk the basics of growing veggies on your patio.

The first, and in some ways the most important part, of container gardening is the container itself. Containers can be made from a variety of materials including clay, plastic, cloth, wood, concrete blocks or even wire baskets with sphagnum moss as long as the container has never contained any toxic chemicals. Some of the cheapest options of containers can be storage totes, five-gallon buckets, protein tubs from livestock or even old swimming pools your kids have outgrown. The key is they need to be a minimum of 6 inches deep and they have to have drainage holes, which you can easily add yourself. Large vegetables such as tomatoes, squash, watermelon and corn will need containers that are a minimum size of a five-gallon bucket but smaller vegetables can easily be grown in much smaller pots.

Once you have a container, the now we figure out where you are going to set it. Fruiting vegetables need 8 hours minimum of sunlight a day, preferably more, while leaf crops need approximately 6 hours minimum of sun. Figure out where you want to put your container before you fill it so that it will received the maximum amount of light possible as the containers get very heavy when filled. A word of caution that water from the containers can stain wooden decks.

Now that you have your container and a location it's time to fill the container. Whatever media or mix you use it should provide nutrients for the plant, hold moisture, allow for maximum root growth and support the plant so it doesn't fall over. I will never recommend to use just straight garden dirt or top soil in containers. It tends to turn to a rock as it dries out and become compacted so the roots can't grow through it. A peat or coco coir based potting mix is your best option for containers in combination with compost. You can re-use your soil for several years, as long as you didn't have any major disease issues. I would refresh the soil every couple of years by adding in new compost or potting soils to replace the nutrients used by the plants every year.

As with all container plants, your vegetables will need watered on a regular basis, especially later in the summer when we get really hot. One way to reduce the amount you have to water is to put a mulch layer down over the top of your soil to reduce evaporation and help keep the soil cooler. Fertilizer will also be necessary to keep the plants producing all



summer long. I typically mix a slow release vegetable fertilizer when I put my soil in the containers. This way my vegetables get some fertilizer every time I water but I'll also fertilize every couple of weeks with a water-soluble vegetable fertilizer once the plants start to set blooms and produce fruit. I tend to wait to fertilize my tomatoes till they set blooms because I want them to produce tomatoes, not just grow really impressive tops.

The final question is what can I plant in my containers? You can grow any kind of vegetable in a container you would grow in the ground. When looking at varieties find ones that are labeled "dwarf" or "bush" varieties. There is a wide array of varieties that have been developed strictly for containers and they are usually labeled as such. Tomatoes, peas and vining crops will need some support to grow. A tomato cage or trellis can help keep them contained and from sprawling everywhere on your deck.

This summer you can still have fresh vegetables in your household. Even if you have soil issues, no room in your back yard, live in an apartment or physically can't get into the garden anymore you can still have fresh vegetables in your house all summer long. Now is the time to plant your cool season vegetables, onions and potatoes and it's almost time to plant warm season crops with the last frost date now behind us. Happy Growing!