

## **Growing Vegetables in Containers**

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Do you want to grow vegetables but only have a small space? You may know that herbs can easily grow in containers, but so can only vegetables. With a few special considerations, you can create your own mini-garden.

There are many benefits to container gardening. Accessible, convenient, economical, and efficient, containers allow you to work with the area you have. It requires little or no land and avoids the problems with planting in our poor Florida soil.

First, you need to pick a site. This could be a patio, deck, balcony, doorstep, or windowsill, but also along fences and in fence corners, in and around flower beds, next to walks and drives, near the foundation of the house, or along the perimeter of an existing garden.

You can be creative or basic with selecting a container. Containers can include hanging baskets, flower pots, garbage cans, and buckets. I've also seen wheelbarrows, old toilets, bath tubs, and even an old car made into a container garden. A raised bed or square foot garden can also be considered a container.

Make sure you plan for drainage since waterlogged soil can kill the plant. You can add holes on the bottom or the side of the container. You can also put some coarse gravel, small stones, or Styrofoam peanuts (to lighten the load) on the bottom for drainage.

If you are recycling a container, scrub it well and rinse it in a mild bleach solution. For porous containers like clay, wood, or cement, soak them well in water before filling.

The plant will be more sensitive to temperature extremes than in the ground. Overheating can kill the plant. Thick wood insulates best. Dark-colored containers absorb more heat while light-colored containers reflect heat.

Some vegetables do better in various sized containers. Vegetables such as beets, lettuce, onions, radishes, spinach, and Swiss chard thrive in shallow containers (9-12" deep). In medium-depth containers (12-18' deep), vegetables such as carrot, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, peas, peppers, and cherry tomatoes do best.

Reserve deep containers (16-18" deep) for beans, cucumbers, potatoes, summer squash, and tomatoes.

When choosing a soil, the media should drain well but not dry out too fast. Soilless mixes are good because they are free of disease organisms and weed seeds, less likely to compact, hold moisture and nutrients well, and lightweight. Some commercial products include Jungle Growth, Sta-Green, and Miracle-Gro. You can also make your own. I do 1/3 sphagnum peat, 1/3 vermiculite, and 1/3 blended compost for my some of my square foot gardens and it doesn't require additional fertilizer, just more compost.

Most media requires additional fertilizer and dolomite. It is best to use a slow-release fertilizer or bonemeal and bloodmeal if you want to be organic. If using a liquid fertilizer, apply it every week or two.

Most vegetables grow and produce when grown in full sun (6-8 hours sun). Fruit-bearing plants, such as cukes, tomatoes, peppers, and eggplants, require the most sun. Additionally, they often need to be trellised or caged to provide additional support. Leafy vegetables, like greens, cabbage, and herbs, will tolerate more shade than fruiting or roots crops like radishes, beets, and onions.

Finally, make sure your plant is properly watered. Small containers dry out more quickly so keep the management in mind. Water thoroughly and deeply, never let the soil dry out completely, and avoid wetting the leaves. Blossom end rot in tomatoes is more prevalent when they dry out too much. You can purchase micro irrigation systems that hook up to your spigot to make watering easier. Earth boxes and self-watering containers have a reservoir in the bottom so that the water is wicked from the bottom.

If you've never tried vegetable gardening, start with a container or two. If you need help, attend my "Make Cheap and Easy Self-watering Tomato Containers" class on September 13 from 6-7:30 p.m. The cost is \$20 and you get a container and a tomato plant. The class is at the UF/IFAS Extension Alachua County Office (2800 NE 39 Ave, Gainesville). Register on Eventbrite at <http://tinyurl.com/jlscg65>.