



Vegetables: Try Container Growing

Some of the deterrents to planting a vegetable garden may be lack of space, lack of time, and insufficient sunlight for a garden. While these are important issues, they can be overcome to some extent. One immediate solution is to grow vegetables in containers. Container-grown vegetable plants are easy to care for, require little space, and are mobile – plants in containers can be moved about to sunny locations on the patio, balcony, or doorstep.

Containers

There is practically no limit to the kind of containers that may be used to grow vegetables. Since the goal is to save money while producing healthy food, the cheaper the container, the better. As such, old nursery pots are ideal, though bushel baskets, plastic buckets, and milk crates lined with a plastic trash bag are other options. The important things are that containers not have held any toxic substances and they must have proper drainage. If necessary, drill holes along the sides near the bottom of the containers. Containers with a volume of three to five gallons are best for most vegetables crops.

Soil

A light weight soil that holds nutrients and moisture yet drains well is essential. Commercial mixes of peat moss and vermiculite or perlite are great for containers. However, some money can be saved by making your own soil mix. A suitable recipe is: 1 bushel (1 bushel = 0.93 gal.) each of vermiculite and peat moss, 1 ¼ cups of limestone, ½ cup of superphosphate, and 2-3 tablespoons of slow-release fertilizer. The final mix should be moistened several hours before use to insure uniform absorption of water by the peat moss. Compost may be used in place of peat moss and coarse sand in place of vermiculite.

Plants

Almost any vegetable can be grown in containers, but varieties of “miniature” or “bush” type are best suited for container gardening. Also, vegetables that produce continually throughout the growing season are the most cost effective crops to grow. Therefore, start with tomatoes, peppers, summer squash, and bush type cucumbers.

Care and Culture

The key maintenance task for container growing is watering. Soil in containers tends to dry quickly, so frequent watering is critical. Water thoroughly whenever soil feels dry to the touch. Frequent watering also benefits container-grown plants by washing away excess salts from the soil mix and by cooling the soil on hot summer days.

If slow-release fertilizer is used, it should supply enough nutrients for much of the growing season. More can be added if plant growth slows and foliage becomes pale. If using a water soluble fertilizer, applications may have to be made at 2-3 week intervals once plants are well established and growing. Follow the directions on the product label for rates of application.

Staking taller upright vegetables such as tomatoes is necessary to keep the stems from breaking. In addition, very productive pepper plants may become top heavy with fruit and

staking of these plants is a good idea. If other than bush varieties of cucumbers are grown, place the container next to a trellis so that the cucumber vine may grow on it.

Sunlight is essential for best yields of fruiting types of crops. Therefore, containers should be placed where they will receive at least 6 hours of direct sunlight. In less than ideal conditions, containers may have to be moved about to take advantage of available light. Some gardeners will place containers on garden carts, wheelbarrows, or wagons to make moving of plants easier. Leafy crops grown in containers need less light than fruiting crops. Containers with leaf lettuce or other greens can be located in places that receive as little as 3 or 4 hours of direct sunlight.

Ron Kujawski
UMass Extension Specialist, Agriculture and Landscape Program 4/09