

MESSENGER-INQUIRER

	University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, Food and Environment <i>Cooperative Extension Service</i>
	extension.ca.uky.edu HORTICULTURE EDUCATION Annette Meyer Heisdorffer, PhD Daviness County Extension Office

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Vegetable Gardening in Containers
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How can I grow vegetables when living in an apartment or rented home with limited outdoor space? How can I make vegetable gardening easier to access? Growing vegetables in containers is an answer to these questions.

Vegetables suited for containers include beets, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, cucumber, bush cucumber, eggplant, kale, lettuce, pepper, radishes, spinach, Swiss chard, tomatoes, cherry or grape tomatoes, turnips, and zucchini. Herbs suitable for containers include chives, garden thyme, basil, marjoram, and summer savory. In addition, look for words that describe the vegetable as bred specifically for containers or small spaces.

When deciding where to locate the container of vegetables, the amount of sunlight is key. Most vegetables require full sun to reach their production potential with at least 6 hours of sunlight. An exception is lettuce, which will grow in partial shade.

Take advantage of various microclimates where the temperatures may be warmer and protect the plants from whipping winds. For example, in a full sun location where the heat

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radiates off a wall, heat-loving plants, such as eggplant and tomato, can be placed outside earlier in the growing season to take advantage of the heat.

Containers for vegetables are available in many sizes, forms, and shapes. They can be made of clay, redwood, cedar wood, or plastic. Also consider using barrels, cut-off milk jugs, or window boxes. Unusual containers add interest to the garden. Never use containers that have held products that would be toxic to plants or people. Wood for use around vegetable plants should never be treated with creosote or pentachlorophenol (Penta) wood preservatives. These may be toxic to plants and harmful to people as well.

The size of the container depends on the growth requirements of the vegetable. Watering larger plants is easier when using big containers. A 4 to 5-gallon bucket works well for one plant of the following vegetables: eggplant, tomato, pepper, yellow squash, and zucchini. Make sure the buckets are food grade to avoid chemical residues from leaching into the potting soil. Some restaurants, bakeries, and stores may have food grade buckets to give away or for sale.

Containers at least 6 to 8 inches deep are adequate for many other vegetables such as beets, broccoli, cucumbers, kale, lettuce, onions, radishes, spinach, Swiss chard, and turnips. Green beans, cabbage, carrots, collards, and peas grow best in containers at least 10 inches deep.

The spacing between individual plants within the container varies depending on the vegetable. Cabbage and broccoli should be planted in single pots if they cannot be placed at least 15 inches apart. Cherry tomato plants, which are compact and called patio size, may be grown in hanging baskets.

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A 12 by 48 by 8-inch container makes a great patio herb garden. Chives, garden thyme, basil, marjoram, and summer savory will all do well in such a planter box. Mints, oregano, and rosemary grow well in hanging baskets because of their sprawling growth habit.

Make sure a container has drainage holes in the bottom so the plant roots do not stand in water, which may cause them to rot and die. A saucer placed under the container collects the water, but remember to empty it to avoid keeping the plants too wet or allowing mosquitoes to develop.

Use a commercially prepared soilless mix in the containers. Using only garden soil is not recommended because it will not allow proper drainage. The commercially prepared mix should allow water to drain easily. If it is fine, the mix will hold too much water and cause the plant roots to rot.

Pay particular attention to watering container gardens. Container soils can dry out very quickly, especially on a concrete patio in full sun. Water when the soil feels dry, which may be several times each week as the plants grow larger. However, the soil should not be soggy or have water standing on top. Another tip is to add enough water until it runs out the drainage holes. This helps to prevent a buildup of salts in the soil from the fertilizer.

Fertilize plants once every two to three weeks with a soluble plant fertilizer according to the label directions. When starting vegetables from seed directly in a pot, the first fertilizer application is made three weeks after the plants have two sets of leaves. Then repeat once a week using a water-soluble plant fertilizer at one-half strength according to the label directions.

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Keep a close watch for insects and diseases that may attack vegetables. Identify any problems and take appropriate control measures. Contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service Office if you have problems identifying diseases and insect pests.

Protect plants from very high heat caused by light reflection from pavement or a building as the temperature increases during the summer. If necessary, move them to a cooler spot or shade them during the hottest part of the day. Also, plants may need to be moved to a more sheltered location during severe hail, rain, or windstorms.

For more information about gardening in containers, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service Office at 270-685-8480 or annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu.

Annette's Tip:

For more information about growing vegetables in containers or in the garden, the publications on "Gardening in Small Spaces" available at <https://publications.ca.uky.edu/files/ID248.pdf> and "Home Vegetable Gardening in Kentucky" available at <https://publications.ca.uky.edu/files/ID128.pdf> are also available from our office.

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