

Putting the garden into pots

My friend laughs when I tell her I'm doing square-foot gardening this year. "Looks more like square-inch gardening," she says, pointing at the sixteen-inch planter packed with parsley, cilantro, and petunia. "Can't you cram any more in there?"

Well, actually, I've already sown a teaspoon of mesclun, which will be peeking out between the big transplants in a day or two, a process I would explain to her, but her giggles drown out the details. I figure I will harvest most of the fast-growing lettuce before the other inhabitants of the pot begin to feel really crowded. And the cilantro will reach its peak and begin to decline once the weather heats up. Sometimes I let cilantro go to seed so I can collect some coriander (that's what the seeds are called when you buy them in a bottle), but this year, there won't be enough space left in that pot to let it stand past prime. I'll free up its place so the parsley can shake out its deep green leaves and expand. By early to mid summer,



In Your Backyard

Jessie Gunn Stephens

only two parsleys and a Wave petunia will occupy that pot, and they'll have plenty of room.

In a sunnier backyard spot, I've housed tomatoes with basil in other big containers. The experts tell us that a tomato plant requires at least five gallons of soil dedicated to its needs, so if you want to try this, choose containers accordingly. For square-foot gardening, it's best to use a vining toma-

to that you can train up a trellis or over the side, so its foliage won't smother anything else in the pot. Last year, I grew Sweet 100 tomatoes, two plants to the pot, and had juicy gems to munch on right up until frost. This year, I've planted two pots with four varieties. Experimentation is underway.

Such experimenting has already shown that many herbs adapt beautifully to pot cultivation. Having lost some mature rosemarys to winter rains a couple of years ago, I've learned to love the rewards of letting them live in well-drained containers. Evergreen, they are beautiful throughout the year and will lend their sweet, resinous fragrance to your roasted chicken any time you fancy it. Chives love pots, as do mints of all flavors. So do such water-sensitive herbs as sage and oregano, but they demand excellent drainage. (It took me some time to figure out that good drainage is

not the same thing as no water.)

Plants that I plan to raise in containers for the first time this year include shallots, Swiss chard, cucumbers, squash, and maybe okra, if I can find one of

the dwarf varieties. I grew black-eyed peas in pots last year, but the harvest was meager. I did everything wrong, starting with sitting them where they didn't get enough sun and ending (killing) them by my very natural reluctance to get out and water during the hottest part of the summer. Bush beans, planted and harvested earlier in the year, adapt well to containers. But I think I'll skip the sweet corn. That's a project for the brave under even the best of conditions.

Containers have to be watered. You will be astounded at how quickly they dry out when the wind blows the way it has this spring. Don't put your whole garden into them if you plan to take a week-long vacation in midsummer. But if you can be there to tend it daily, such a garden offers its own rewards—fewer disease problems, cleaner harvests, easier weed control—and it may well keep your friends and neighbors amused.

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Two parsleys and a Wave petunia share one large pot with a cilantro, which will be removed after it matures in late spring to make way for the other plants as they expand.