

Your garden can be more than just a plot of ground with rows of vegetables and a smattering of flowers. Use your imagination to turn it into something memorable--fun, yet good-looking, peaceful and productive.

If you're lucky enough to have an acre plot, you won't have to shuffle space to make room for the vegetables you want. Those gardeners not so happily blessed have to plan carefully to make the most of the space they have.

As you plan your vegetable garden, keep in mind that vegetables are adaptable. They'll grow in almost any location, with little help from you, so long as they get a full day of sunshine. If your yard is small, hilly, or even wooded, don't despair--you can still raise more, bigger, and better vegetables than you probably thought possible and have a good time, too.

Determine the vegetables you'd like to grow, and do some reading on varieties that will adapt to your soil and sun conditions. Seed catalogues are ideal for this purpose. Don't include something just because every vegetable gardener tells you to grow it--if you don't like tomatoes, for example, using precious space to grow them is wasteful and time-consuming. That doesn't mean, however, that you shouldn't experiment--some of the offbeat vegetables can be fun to grow. Keep track of the varieties you plant. If one is a disappointment, switch to another variety next year. Eventually, you'll have a list of personal preferences that will grow well in your backyard with the amount of work you're willing to do.

Unique gardens.

Remember that every garden--like every gardener--is unique. That's one of the reasons growing your own is so rewarding.

A formal garden may be designed to make your family's vegetable garden fit right in with your home's well-landscaped exterior. It can host a variety of crops--from cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, lettuce, tomatoes, and pole beans to dwarf rosemary, thyme, dill, chives, and basil in a separate bed.

Each bed would be outlined with railroad ties that not only look good, but also help the soil retain moisture. Tile walkways through the garden provide easy access for weeding, harvesting, and planting the beds. Tomatoes are grown in cages for better harvests and to keep them neatly attractive. Potted dwarf apple trees could round out the garden.

Rooftop and balcony gardens.

Another way to adapt a garden to your needs is to grow vegetables in boxes and pots. This way, even if you don't have a speck of land to your name, you can get a respectable harvest of homegrown produce.

On a rooftop garden, pots of tomatoes and eggplant will enjoy a full day of sun. Other planting beds can include melons, lettuce, and cucumbers. Dwarf and standard size

marigolds add color to every bed. Potted bulb flowers and shrubs can help give your rooftop a penthouse air.

If you decide to container-garden on a balcony, be sure it's strong enough to support the weight of several heavy pots. (They'll weigh even more when watered.) Plastic pots will probably be your best choice because they're lightweight. They'll need drainage, too; simply put a one-inch layer of gravel in the bottom of each container.

Plants in pots, especially on hot, windy rooftops and balconies, require plenty of moisture to replace that which evaporates. Before you start planting, be sure you have a convenient way to water all the pots. During midsummer, most pots need to be watered at least once a day. Morning is the best time.

Another important point to keep in mind before you start a balcony garden is that rooftops, sides of buildings, and fences reflect a fair amount of sun, making it more difficult to grow the cool-season crops, such as lettuce, beets, chard, and spinach. For best results, concentrate on the warm-season crops, such as melons, squash, tomatoes, and eggplant.