

Growing your own vegetables in containers on the back steps, porch, balcony, or patio is the best way to enjoy homegrown garden produce without taking up a lot of valuable space in the backyard.

Anything that will hold soil can be used as a container for growing a healthy, delicious harvest of fresh vegetables. Old kitchen pots, cake pans, plastic hampers, buckets, wood baskets, clay pots, wastebaskets, garbage cans, or even an old sink, washtub, small livestock tank, or wheelbarrow will do. Of course, if you have scrap lumber, you can make containers that will fit the size and shape of your balcony or porch.

Soil is perhaps the key element in a successful, container-grown harvest. It should be lightweight, so plants can be moved around, but it should also be heavy enough to give vegetables needed support, especially in unprotected windy locations, such as a balcony. Stones in the bottom of the receptacle help to keep it from tipping.

Container soil should also be able to retain large amounts of water, with plenty of peat moss, perlite, vermiculite, or well-rotted compost added to prevent drying out and soil compaction. But be prepared to water the vegetables often.

Buy specially prepared commercial soil mixes, or mix your own using equal parts of garden loam, peat moss, and coarse sand. (If your garden soil is already on the sandy side, eliminate the extra sand from the mixture.)

Commercial mixes are sterile, free from soil-borne diseases, and packed with nutrients essential to good plant growth. Although you can sterilize your own soil, it's messy and time-consuming even for a few containers. By using these commercial mixes, you are almost ensured of getting your crops off to a good start, but you do spend a little more money.

Unlike topsoil in your yard, container soil cannot soak up water from the subsoil. All pots and planters will need to be watered frequently (every day during dry, hot spells). Clay pots and hanging baskets are especially prone to drying out. Check them often.

Before you plant, make sure containers have adequate drainage. Poke holes in plastic pots with a screwdriver or ice pick, if necessary. If you are planting in wooden tubs or boxes, be sure there is a drainage hole every three or four inches.

Pots should also be large enough to hold a normal root system. Foliage will quickly turn yellow, due to lack of nutrients, if the pot is too small. Large vegetables, such as tomatoes and zucchini, need plastic tubs at least twelve inches deep. Smaller crops, such as carrots, green onions, and herbs, can get by with nine-inch-deep containers.

Once containers are planted, place them in a location where they will receive at least six hours of sunlight a day. And because your garden will be highly visible in the neighborhood, select plants that are decorative as well as functional, such as rhubarb, chard, or flowering kale plants. Or add some flowers--dwarf zinnias, dwarf marigolds,

petunias, alyssum, and ageratum--that will not only provide plenty of color, but will also attract valuable pollinating insects to your container garden. Thyme and borage are two herb species that are colorful and popular with bees. The herbs are useful in cooking too.