

Container Gardening 101: 7 Steps to Create a Container Garden



Container gardening is a great way to grow fruits, vegetables, and herbs, whether you have limited outdoor space for gardening or you simply love the look of plants grown in pots, raised boxes, and even refurbished items like tires, furniture, and wheel barrows.

Containers not only fit in small places and add beauty to any outdoor space; they're also portable, they're easy to maintain, they save water, they're practically weed-free, and you can plant in them while sitting down.

It's no wonder fans of container gardening are widespread and diverse, ranging from seasoned gardeners wanting to downsize their planting space to rookies with small balconies or patios.

Jessica Walliser, horticulturist and author of "[Container Gardening Complete](#)," grows vegetable in containers at her home near Pittsburgh to overcome the challenges of growing in the ground, like poor soil drainage, insect pests, and weeds.

"I also grow in containers because it gives me the chance to grow beautiful tropical plants that I can easily move into the garage for winter," she says. Some of her favorites include brugmansia, red Abyssinian bananas, and a black rubber tree plant.

Because of the growing interest in container gardens, it's easier than ever to find dwarf, mini, and tiny varieties of fruit and vegetable plants, and planters are available in all shapes and sizes, including elevated beds.

Want to get started? Here's a step-by-step guide to get your [container garden](#) on the path to success.

Step 1: Determine where to place a container garden and when to plant

Container gardens can grow in backyards, front yards, on balconies, decks, patios, and even in window boxes. To find the best spot for your container garden, consider the important basics:

- Enough sunshine
- Easy access to a water source
- Protected from household pets

Most summer flowers and vegetables need 6 to 8 hours of sun to grow and produce fruit, while other plants, like greens and culinary herbs, can grow in partial shade (3 to 6 hours of sun).

Observe your gardening site and see how sunny it is in the morning, early afternoon, and late afternoon. Place containers where they'll get the maximum amount of sun they need to thrive.

Plant when the season and temperatures are right for your area. In some parts of the country, gardeners can plant nearly year round; in other regions planting is limited to the number of days between the last frost in spring and the first frost of fall. Check with [your county's Cooperative Extension](#) for the prime planting time for you.

Step 2: Choose what you'll plant in your container garden

Choose the annual and perennial flowers you enjoy and the vegetables you like to eat. You can also combine flowers and vegetables for an ornamental and edible container garden.

At the beginning of the season, Jessica plants a crop of kale, lettuce, and peas in a large elevated cedar patio planter to get an early start and to keep seeds from rotting in cold, clay-based soil.

To get the biggest bang for your container-garden buck, grow the priciest vegetables you typically buy

at the store or farmers market, like herbs and heirloom tomatoes. You should also plant the vegetables you buy in large quantities, like lettuce, spinach, green onions, beans, cucumbers, eggplants, summer squash, and peppers.

One of Jessica's favorite summertime container combinations is planting eggplant, Swiss chard, spicy globe basil, and gem marigolds together. "The marigolds are ornamental and edible, and the chard produces delicious greens for months."

When selecting seeds and plants, look for varieties that are specially bred to thrive in containers. Plant descriptions include bush-type, baby, little, early, snacking, and cut and come again lettuces and other greens.

Step 3: Picking the right container

You can use terra cotta pots, glazed ceramic containers, plastic pots, fabric containers, raised planting beds, self-watering containers, hanging baskets and more—the only limit to your container choices is your imagination. Repurposed items can also make good containers. Think bushel baskets, whiskey barrels, metal wash tubs, and watering cans.

3 Keys to Choosing Containers

1. Bigger is better, so match the mature size of the plant(s) to the container by using the plant height and width printed on your seed packets or plant labels. A 2- to 5-gallon container with a 12-inch opening is considered the minimum size.
2. Containers need drainage holes at the bottom to keep plant roots healthy. Drill or poke holes as needed.
3. Plant vegetables and other edibles in food-safe containers. Options include free or inexpensive food-grade plastic buckets from delis, bakeries, or restaurants.

Step 4: Plant in your container garden

Materials You'll Need:

- Container with drainage holes
- Container saucer
- Paper coffee filters
- Potting soil meant for containers (organic if you're growing an organic garden)
- Slow-release plant fertilizer (organic or not)
- Planting trowel
- Plants or seed packets
- A spray mister
- Organic mulch material (shredded newsprint, straw, dried untreated grass, and/or dry leaves)

Container Planting Instructions:

1. Place the container on the saucer to catch water runoff.
2. Inside the container, cover drainage holes with coffee filters to keep the soil in. Fill the container with potting soil to within 2 inches of the container's rim.
3. Mix in the recommended amount of slow-release plant fertilizer.
4. Using the planting trowel, dig a planting hole or holes in the container. If you're planting seeds, follow the planting instructions on the seed packet.

5. Place your plant or plants in the holes at the same depth as they were in their pot.
6. Gently firm the soil.
7. Water plants to thoroughly moisten the soil at the root ball. Water the seeds with a spray mister to moisten the soil; keep it moist until seeds sprout.
8. Add a thin layer of mulch around the plants or wait for seeds to sprout before adding mulch to the top of containers.

Step 5: Care for your container garden

A successful container garden needs a lot of TLC. Water when the first inch or so of soil is dry (use your finger as a gauge). Water thoroughly to soak the soil deeply, and until it runs out the bottom of the container.

Every two weeks, fertilize your garden with dry or liquid soluble plant food for the healthiest plants and biggest yields. Use a trellis to support tall vines like tomatoes and beans and place it in the container after planting.

Take steps to control any issues you spot right away. Keep up with flowers by removing dead blossoms (deadheading), pull any weeds that sprout, and watch for insect pests.

Step 6: Harvest your container garden

Harvest vegetables by clipping them from the plant as soon as they're ready. Don't wait too long; earlier is better than later. Regular harvesting of fruits, vegetables, and herbs keeps them producing instead of going to seed.

Herbs and lettuces can be harvested while they're small; they'll still be tasty. Eggplants need to be cut from the plant while the skin is shiny, even if the fruits are small. Peppers can be picked when they're the right size for eating. For maximum flavor, tomatoes should be red-ripe before you pluck them from the vine.

Step 7: Care for contain gardens in the off season

Depending on your winter weather temperatures, you may be able to leave containers outside year round. However, in climates prone to freezes, containers made of terra cotta or glazed ceramic should be moved into a garage or shed to keep them from cracking.

Annual plants will fade during the cold temperatures, but some perennial plants, like chives and winter onions, will go dormant and start growing again in the spring. The early greens signal a new season of container gardening is on its way.