

Grow Fresh Vegetables in Containers



To save water this year, gardeners might consider growing vegetables in containers. Although container vegetables do need frequent watering, less soil means less water use than in the garden. There are other benefits as well. Sterile soil means fewer soil-borne diseases. It also eliminates backbreaking weeding and rototilling.

Mobile containers allow gardeners to move plants as seasonal changes affect light, or to arrange pots for aesthetic value or utility. Strategically placed containers can allow cooks to harvest herbs on the spot for freshness. Guests can harvest mint to flavor iced tea without leaving the porch.

Limited space is a problem with container-grown vegetables. Gardeners must select crops that adapt to pots. Watermelons and sweet corn are out. Beans, lettuce, spinach, radishes and chard grow well in containers. Larger crops like tomatoes, bell peppers and eggplant may need larger pots. Tomato varieties like "Patio" are relatively short and squat and are specially bred for container production. Herbs like chives and basil make excellent container plants.

Sterile potting soil requires careful nutrient management for plant growth. Gardeners can fertilize container vegetables weekly using a complete fertilizer that has all needed macro and micronutrients. Try slow-release fertilizers, which gradually feed vegetables during the growing season. Sunlight is crucial for container vegetables. Crops like tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant require a minimum of 6 to 8 hours of direct sunlight daily. Leafy vegetables like spinach and lettuce and root crops like radishes can tolerate less sun.

Protect porch or balcony pots from wind and pets. Try anchoring the pots to a railing or wall. Secure trellises for beans or peas outside smaller containers so the wind won't blow them over. Watering pots is a constant headache. Smaller pots generally dry out sooner than larger pots, and clay pots dry out sooner than plastic ones. Place organic mulch like dried bluegrass clippings on the soil surface to reduce evaporation. Try drip irrigation systems with battery timers to water pots daily or every third day, depending on evaporation.

Pots come in many shapes, sizes, colors and types, ranging from clay and plastic to concrete and wood. If using wood containers, choose redwood or cedar to prevent decay. All pots need drainage holes to avoid drowning roots. Pots painted black will help warm soil in winter, but a black pot can scorch plant roots in summer.

This article adapted from Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, USDA. Please contact Ken Churches at cdcalaveras@ucdavis.edu or (209) 754-6475 with your agricultural questions. To speak with a Certified Master Gardener: Calaveras (209) 754-2880, Tuolumne (209) 533-5696, Amador (209) 223-6837, El Dorado (530) 621-5543.