



Starting your Container Vegetable Garden

Raising vegetables, or any plant, in confined spaces presents a special category of challenges. The biggest problem that many space confined urban gardeners face is sunlight. Most vegetables require between 6 to 8 hours of direct sunlight; small spaces often are shaded. One of the possible solutions to this kind of challenge is to put your garden on wheels.

Whatever container you chose follows these guidelines.

- Be aware of what was in your container. If using 5-gallon buckets make sure they didn't contain something that will harm you or your plants.
- If you are planning on moving them, keep the size small enough that you can handle them easily when they are filled with soil and plants.
- Drainage. Your container has to have adequate drainage. One of the biggest mistakes I see is inadequate drainage holes in the container.
- Material. Be aware that plastic containers do not hold breath. Plants will do ok in plastic but they tend to get hotter faster and colder quicker. If weight is an issue, then, by all means, go with plastic. On the other hand, if you are not planning on moving your containers regularly, chose terra cotta, concrete (or one of its derivatives, or stone.



The next thing to think about is your growing media. Soil. This is the one thing you want to get right. Get this right and you will have a much greater chance of producing a bountiful harvest. Get it wrong and your plants will struggle you will be frustrated.

Preparing your Soil.

Start with local soil if you can source it. Soil from your yard is the best alternative. If you must, select a composted garden soil in plastic bags from the big box store down the street. DO NOT use the bagged soils with any additives, fertilizers or amendments. Get organic composted garden soil. Read the label!!

You will also need organic compost. The best option is to use compost from your home and garden. Compost is easy to make (see our composting section) and compost from your yard and home is always the best. If necessary visit your big box garden soil and get organic compost. Again, read the label and make sure there are no additives or adulterants.



Whole Gluten Corn Meal or dry molasses. What? Yes. It is imperative that you put nutrients in this soil to feed the micro-organisms that are so vital to healthy soil. The corn gluten meal or dry molasses provides that carbon and other trace minerals in the form of sugars.



Worm Castings. Worm castings are so important to this step to provide the cultures of bacteria and fungi to kick start your soil. In addition, the worm castings will have worm egg casings as well and you should soon have worms in your soil, continuing to do what they do to keep your soil healthy.

Rock Minerals. There are a wide range of options in this category. You can get exotic blends but we prefer the simplest and easiest to source. Top of the list is Texas Green Sand

or Lava rock dust. Our third choice and the easiest to find is decomposed granite. Most landscape rock and gravel supply companies will have decomposed granite in bulk and many sell it by the 50 or 60 lb bag.

The easiest way I have found to mix the ingredients is to fill a five-gallon bucket with soil. In another bucket fill it half with compost and then add a coffee can of each of the other ingredients and mix them thoroughly. Take half the ingredients in the first bucket and mix it in another bucket with half the ingredients containing the compost, worm casting, rock mineral mixture. Mix thoroughly and then repeat with the last of the ingredients. Lastly, put the two mixtures together and mix again.

You might find it easier to measure your ingredients and pour them all onto a plastic tarp on a driveway or patio and mix them there.

I like to add about two inches of gravel to the bottom of the container to ensure that the drainage holes don't get clogged with soil. Fill your container to about 3 inches of the top of the container. Plant your vegetables according to the instructions for that variety and then immediately mulch the container to the top with wood chips.

A word of warning. Despite what you may have been told, what the girl at the garden supply center says and what your neighbor says, do NOT, EVER, use peat moss in your planting soil. Peat Moss, besides being an environmental disaster to harvest and transport, is anti-bacterial by nature. That means that it is acting against you from the very start by inhibiting the bacteria growth in your soil.

Planting

Carefully remove your transplants from the containers. If the roots have begun to circle the pot, carefully open them and spread them. I suggest that you make sure that the root ball on your plants are thoroughly soaked before you plant them. Put them in a container of water while you prepare



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everything else. Plant your transplants according to the instructions that came with the plant, apply the mulch and then water thoroughly.

Watering

Container plants must be monitored carefully for water. We prefer to use drip systems to water our container plants. Drip systems deliver water slowly and exactly where you want it to be. The secret to watering is slow deep watering only when the plant needs it. Watering too much in a container will cause root rot, invite disease and insects and eventually stress the plant. Stressed plants are an invitation to failure. You want to maintain an even water distribution throughout the soil. As you water, the air is driven out of the soil. As the soil dries it pulls fresh air back into the soil. You must have this pulse effect for healthy soil.

If you must water with a can or a hose, do so carefully. Again, slow watering is the best. Allow the water to infiltrate the soil. Fast heavy watering will cause the top layer of your soil to compact and form a crust. This will cause the water to subsequently run to the sides of the container and simply wick down between your soil and the container to the bottom and run out onto the ground. Very little will get to the roots of the plant.

Feeding

Feed your container plants on a regular basis using a high quality organic fertilizer. It is quite easy to make your own but there are acceptable brands on the market. One of the best and easiest to make organic fertilizers is compost tea. See our Composting area for more information on making compost tea.

Feed about every two weeks. It is hard to overfeed with organic fertilizers.

More than anything else, have fun and enjoy yourself. Growing vegetables, or any plant for that matter, is a magical thing.