Container Gardening - grow your own food with ease

by Alon Lutzker via stef *Wednesday, Dec 5 2012, 1:55pm*
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> One of the best ways to start growing your own food is in containers. Only a few containers are required, a small amount of potting soil (purchase at any garden store), and some seedlings, a little space and away you go. It's such a convenient way of gardening for experts and novices alike.

To grow food in a garden requires building soil fertility (see previous post). It's not a complicated task, anyone can do it, but it does take time. With a container garden, you can pretty much get started in a few hours.

There are many different types of containers for many different situations, a sunny window, porch or roof is all you need to get started.

Advantages of Growing Food in Containers:

Instant soil fertility – Just buy potting soil from the garden store. It's designed especially for optimal fertility, aeration and drainage. You can get a 30 liter bag for under 20 NIS, and I've never heard of anyone getting bad quality potting soil.

Super efficient – Very small spaces can be utilized, the amounts of water are minimal, and it takes next to no maintenance. A sunny porch and a few containers can yield a nice amount of food for even a novice gardener. Even the time required to harvest the food is super fast because it will be so close by.

Make them yourself – Almost any used container that would be thrown away can be recycled. You can buy the raw materials and build them with some simple tools, or you can purchase containers from the garden store or online. I'll mention a few guidelines on how to do this.

Ideal for Renters -- How many times have I heard people say "when I get my own house I'll start growing my own food". Container gardening is the solution. If you move, just pack them up and

bring them along. You may even decide on your new rental house according to the gardening conditions.

Mobility – During harsh weather that might otherwise kill the plants, a container can be moved to a shady or sheltered area, or even inside the house. During short days of Winter with little sun, they can be moved to sunnier areas.

Fewer pests -- There is a long list of pests, and other soil born fungus which can give problems to your garden. These problems are all but eliminated by growing in your plants in containers.

What to Grow

Almost any plant can be grown in a container, but one of the best to start with are culunary herbs such as parsley, cilantro, basil, dill, thyme, oregano, mint, chives, and others. There is nothing that has a bigger bang for the buck. There is no single thing that to grow that will improve the taste of what you cook, more than homegrown herbs. You just use them when needed, in the amount needed, and the freshness is unbeatable. That is without all that nasty plastic packaging that comes with the tasteless herbs from the store. I estimate that you can get a full-grown seedling of an herb for twice the price of buying a package of that herb in the store, only it tastes 100 times better, and will supply you with a fresh herb for 1-2 full seasons. Many herbs are biannual and perennials, meaning they grow for 2 or more years.

I like to grow biannual vegetables in containers such as eggplants and peppers. I take them into a sheltered area or even in the house during the winter and they will live and produce during two full growing seasons.

Salad greens are also great to grow in containers. Lettuce, spinach, arugula, mustard leaves, green onions, baby beet leaves, and other leafy greens are ideal for Fall and Winter planting here in Israel. If planting in September, or if during a hot spell in October, start them in the shade or in the house. As the Winter rolls through, our cool Winter causes them to thrive. Also the more you pick from them, the more they produce. I like to have at least 2-3 such containers going at the same time, so that there is always one to “mow” for a fresh salad. Make sure you make a few good vinaigrette dressing recipes so that you’ll always have one ready for the fresh salad.

Broccoli – plant in Sept from seed, Oct/Nov from seedlings. Each plant will give one big head in the middle, and small florets continually after that until late Spring.

Swiss Chard -- plant Sept. to January, and harvest often. They produce a huge amount of food if harvested continuously. Great for quiches, pies, and stir fry. I make lasagna with it.

Leeks – plant in Sept from seed, Oct/Nov from seedlings. If using seeds, use many and thin them out after 1-2 months, since germination rates can be low. They take a pretty long time, and won’t be ready until Feb-March. The smell of fresh leeks pulled from the ground will never leave your memory…

Baby Carrots – The seeds can be hard to find. Regular carrots won’t grow very well in containers. Only plant from seeds. Nothing compares to a fresh carrot pulled from the ground. It’s a completely different vegetable than the one you know from the store. It’s also great fun for kids to pick them.

Spring and Summer crops for containers include tomatoes, eggplant, peppers, strawberries, squash, beans, peas, and cucumbers to name just a few.

Crops that are not recommended for growing in containers, are ones that don't give a big yield per plant. Examples include cabbage, cauliflower, kolorabi – Each plant gives one head, which is not much food for one container over a 3-4 month period. Corn is not ideal for containers because each plant gives 2-3 cobs of corn at best. They are very tall and if they don't have a very big container, they can fall over in even a light wind. Corn is a very big fertilizer hog (nitrogen, specifically), which is difficult to supply in a container in the required amounts.

Compare these examples to the herbs, leafy green salad plants and brocoli, where you cut and recut many times.

Preparing a Container and Planting

Use only potting soil – You can make it yourself, but it's cheap to buy and can be found at any garden store or nursery. The reason for this is the potting soil does not get hard and compacted, making it hard for roots to develop. It also includes fertilizer with readily available nutrients for the plants.

Very good drainage -- Make a lot of holes in the bottom and even some on the sides. Make them big enough so they don't get clogged, and there is enough room under the pot for the water to drain into. Plants roots need air, and if the soil is too wet, the water keeps the air from reaching the roots, causing the plant to suffocate and drown.

Get the right size for each plant – Most of the leafy green plants for salads and herbs can handle small pots such as 5 – 10 liters, because they don't get very big, and their roots are shallow. You can also put a few plants in each container. Other plants mentioned here, need at least 18-20 liter containers, 22 or 25 liters is better, and only put one plant per container, except for the carrots.

Cover the soil – Just like mulch in the garden. Cover it with grass clippings, dried leaves, or even cardboard cut to the shape of the container. Anything to insulate the soil from heat, cold and evaporation. The soil will stay moist for longer, and will require less watering.

Watering – Too much or too little watering is the cause of most container gardening failure. This is basis for a great invention called the self-watering container. I will include instructions for this in a separate post. Soil should always be kept moist or humid, but not wet. If you were to grab a fist of the soil and then squeeze it, the soil should stick together when you release the fist. It should then break apart easily. If water comes out when the soil is squeezed, then it's too wet and will suffocate the plants.

Fertilize using compost "tea" – Fill up a clean 2 liter container with water and let it sit for 24 hours. This is to allow the chlorine in the tap water to evaporate. Chlorine is added to municipal water systems in order to kill harmful bacteria, but when making compost tea, we want all the bacteria to live and multiply and provide fertility for the plant. After 24 hours have passed with the water having sit uncovered, add two handfuls of compost, stir until it is absorbed by the water, and let it sit for another 48 hours, stirring occasionally. After that, just pour the mixture into the container from the top. This should be done once when the plant is flowering, and again when the plant has started to produce. Also add if the plant looks sickly, tired, or if under attack from pests.

More info on container gardening:

A podcast about container gardening, from the great Jack Spirko of The Survival Podcast: http://www.thesurvivalpodcast.com/episode-634-container-gardening-for-the-modern-survivalist.

http://growyourfood.co.il/?p=301
