

ProTips for Small, Yet Bountiful Spaces: Designing Edible Gardens for Balconies, Rooftops and Patios

★ Know Your Space

- **Observe your conditions**
 - Take note of how many hours of sunlight you get on your patio, balcony or rooftop. Most cool season crops and leafy greens will grow well with 4-6 hours of sun - fruiting vegetables will need 8 or more hours.
 - Note areas that are exposed to wind/rain/heat/etc. You can make the most of microclimates by growing heat-lovers in hot spots and sturdy, tall plants to help brace the impact of wind on smaller, more tender plants.
- **Learn the codes**
 - Some buildings have restrictions around putting plants out on balconies - or may only allow ornamentals.
 - On rooftops and balconies, it is important to factor in *weight load capacity*. Be sure to consult with your building codes, do some weight calculations or work with a structural engineer if planting on a rooftop.
- **Manage moisture**
 - Do you have water access nearby? How will you get water to your plants? Container gardens require regular watering during dry weather.
 - Make sure that your drainage holes on containers are clean and clear, especially if exposed during the rainy season.

★ Set Your Plants Up for Success

- **Containers are like fish tanks!**
 - In containers, we are recreating to the best of our ability, the conditions that our plants would experience growing in the ground. If we imagined that the in-ground soil were the ocean, we could liken containers to fish tanks. Compared to being in the ocean, fish in tanks depend on people for fresh water, food and general care; compared to plants in the ground, those in containers are also very dependent on people to meet their basic needs.
- **Choose high-quality, organic potting soil**
 - Potting soil mixes are formulated to provide a lightweight growing medium that can both hold and drain water well, and supply nutrients to your plants.
 - Over time, you will need to amend your containers with compost and organic fertilizers to replenish depleted soil and support a vibrant, yet small community of healthy microorganisms.
- **Consider different types of containers**
 - If weight load is a concern, try growing in lightweight options, such as plastic containers or fabric grow bags.
 - Smaller containers will dry out more quickly than larger containers, and can blow over in high winds on exposed rooftops or balconies.

- What you are choosing to grow can help you decide what type of container to use (or vice versa). Large plants, such as tomatoes, squash, cucumbers, or many perennial plants, will need larger containers, typically 5 gallons or larger. Smaller containers, under 5 gallons, can be great for quick-growing or shallow rooted plants, such as lettuce, mustards, roots, or annual herbs.

★ **Bring the Bounty**

- **Choose crops that are generous**
 - Crops that provide a harvest over a period of time are excellent choices to help maximize the yield from a small space. Examples include herbs, leafy greens (lettuce, mustards, kale, chard, etc), indeterminate tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, peas, and beans.
 - Smaller vegetable varieties, such as cherry tomatoes, miniature cucumbers or gem lettuces, can be great choices in containers.
 - Many fruiting perennials, such as blueberries and raspberries, can offer a generous harvest - look for varieties that have been bred to grow well in containers.
 - If you are growing a fruiting crop, consider pollination (is there enough habitat to support pollinators? Do you need two or more plants?)
- **Plan for continuous harvest & grow intensively**
 - Use off-set spacing to maximize the amount of plants in a small space.
 - Plan for “successions” of crops by staggering timing of plantings. This can help to ensure that something is ready to harvest just as another crop is done.
 - Plant varieties that mature at different times.
 - Companion planting can help “friendly” plants grow closer together.
 - Utilize vertical space. What can be growing together to take advantage of downward, outward and upward space.
 - Grow vertical! Use trellis structures to help plants climb vertically - this can maximize a small growing area and/or make room for additional planting below.
- **Grow year-round**
 - Hardy herbs can add fresh elements to the kitchen in winter.
 - Quick-growing greens can provide bookend bounty in the spring and fall.
- **Incorporate habitat elements**
 - Flowering plants can help to invite pollinators and beneficial insects to your patio, balcony and rooftop.

★ **Eager to learn more? Join Tilth Alliance for a class in Seattle or online:**

<https://tilthalliance.org/get-involved/take-a-class/>

★ **Have garden mysteries or need support with a specific question? Call the Garden Hotline:**

<https://gardenhotline.org/>

★ **Excited to get more involved? Sign up for our email newsletter and stay in touch:**

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