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Anyone can garden—no matter where you live, how much space you have, or your gardening budget. If you are limited on space, time and money, here are some tips to help make gardening work for you.

Start Small

If you have never gardened before, start small. Consider growing one to four different types of vegetables or flowers during your first season until you get some experience under your belt.

For most plants, choosing the sunniest location you have to place your garden plants will yield the most success. Most vegetables need at least eight hours of direct sunlight; leafy greens (like lettuce, spinach, chard, etc.) can grow with as little as 6 hours while fruiting vegetables like tomatoes and cucumber need at least 8 hours.

Your garden can be grown in small spaces including in the ground, in raised beds and containers. There are numerous resources on growing gardens in-ground and in raised beds (see resource list at the end for some ideas) so this publication will focus on growing garden vegetables in containers.

Container gardening provides flexibility as you can locate your garden wherever works best for you—on your porch or steps; against your house, apartment or shed; or in your yard.

Seeds vs Starts

The most inexpensive way to start a garden is with seeds. You can plant your seeds inside before the plants are ready to be transplanted or moved outside. You can use recycled materials to start your seeds in—everything from toilet paper rolls, cereal boxes and newspapers folded into pots to eggshells and egg cartons can be used.

About Containers

Garden pots come in all shapes and sizes but you will need a minimum size of 6.5" (2 quarts) as a container. Leafy greens and herbs grow well in these smaller pots. Aim for a 12" pot (7 to 9 quarts) to accommodate most other vegetables.

Reusing pots works well as an environmentally- and budget-friendly approach. Reused pots do need to be cleaned every year (or with every crop) to avoid transferring diseases. Thoroughly clean by first removing all loose debris, then wash in soapy water and rinse. Next, soak the pot in a mix of 1 part bleach to 9 parts water for at least 10 minutes. Be sure to rinse again before using.

You can also consider other types of containers for your garden but be sure they are safe to use if you plan to grow vegetables in them. That means you should steer clear of anything that is not meant for food, including empty kitty litter containers, tires, and galvanized tubs.

On the other hand, containers like empty milk jugs, yogurt containers and other emptied food containers can be reused as plant containers – just make sure you poke holes in the bottom for water drainage.

If you or someone you know has basic carpentry skills, you can construct plant containers from scrap wood. Just make sure you avoid treated lumber. And, if you don't have containers for larger plants, you can even consider planting directly into a bag of soil!

Sourcing Potting Soil

Unless you are planting your garden in the ground, soil will be a necessary cost of establishing your garden. Bagged products are available at many retailers – look for those called “planting mix” or “potting soil”. Know that the quality of bagged mixes can vary greatly and so you will want to avoid those that “contain sedge peat, feel heavy or gritty, have very fine particles, or appear clumped” (see resource at the end of this piece for more information on choosing potting mixtures). You will want to steer clear of filling containers with 100% topsoil (in-ground soils) as they are too dense for container gardens; however, you can make a planting mix by combining 1 part topsoil with 1 part sand and 1 part compost.

Questions?

Trained volunteers at the UVM Extension Master Gardener Helpline can answer your gardening questions at go.uvm.edu/gardeninghelp. The Helpline is open 24/7/365 for online questions and on Thursday mornings for phone inquiries during the season at 802-656-5421.

Resources

How to Clean and Disinfect Plant Containers: <https://hortnews.extension.iastate.edu/how-clean-and-disinfect-plant-containers>

Choosing Growing Media (Potting Mixture) for Your Container Gardens: <https://extension.umd.edu/resource/growing-media-potting-soil-containers>

UVM Extension Master Gardener: Gardening Resources: <https://www.uvm.edu/extension/mastergardener/gardening-resources>

Getting Started with Vegetable Gardens: <https://www.uvm.edu/sites/default/files/Extension-Master-Gardener/GettingStartedVeg.pdf>

Gardening in Small Spaces: <https://extension.umaine.edu/publications/2761e/>

Plan a Vegetable Garden: https://ag.umass.edu/sites/ag.umass.edu/files/fact-sheets/pdf/FS18_PlanVegetableGarden_0.pdf

Alternative Vegetable Gardens: <https://extension.illinois.edu/blogs/ilriverhort/2018-05-20-alternative-vegetable-gardens>

Safe Container Gardening: <https://louisville.edu/cepm/pdf-files/newpg28>

Using Soil and Soil Mixes: <https://web.extension.illinois.edu/containergardening/soil.cfm>

Recycling in the Garden: <https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/media/sfylifasufledu/baker/docs/pdf/horticulture/RecyclingintheGarden.pdf>

Vegetable Gardening: A Beginner's Guide: <https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/home-vegetable-gardening-a-quick-reference-guide>