**Edibles on the Porch**

The best part of growing food in containers are the possibilities and flexibility they allow for beginner to advanced gardeners. If you are limited by space, time, or poor in-ground garden soil—containers are for you. Container plants can grow anywhere—balcony, patio, deck, courtyards and throughout the landscape. They are great choices for renters. Growing fruits, vegetables, and herbs in containers are the focus of this article—they have a delicious ending.

Let’s look at the ABCs of choosing, placement, planting and caring for your container grown edibles.

**Container Choices**

Recycled items like an old sink or bicycle basket will work as containers for growing edibles. It’s up to your taste and budget to choose what works in your setting. Garden Centers of Colorado have numerous containers to choose from. You may end up having just as much fun considering which container to purchase as shopping the plant aisle!

**What are the differences in container materials?** Porosity is the container’s ability to soak up water. Porous container types like clay pots (terra cotta), wood and coco-lined wire baskets soak up water quickly so may need watering more often when compared to plastic, fiberglass, metal, glazed and stone. Look for frost resistant containers if you plan on leaving them outside from year to year.

Soft-sided felt containers are lightweight, easy to use and store at the end of the season. They also drain very well so overwatering is unlikely making them a good choice for beginning gardeners.

Adequate drainage holes on the bottom or side are highly recommended. However, some pots are meant to be decorative and may not have drainage holes. To compensate, place the edible plant (with drainage holes) in a slightly smaller container inside the decorative pot. Set the inner container on a piece of wood, brick or flat stone to allow drainage.

Self-watering containers are handy and popular, perfect on surfaces where water drainage from a regular container may be an issue to the patio below. They have reservoirs built in at the base of the container, so the plant has a steady supply of water. This avoids the incorrect drought and drown pattern of watering. The plant will not need watering again until the reservoir is low.

**What size container?** Grow what you like to eat and as you gain experience expand your pallet with different edibles. Match the plant’s growing needs to the container size. Large containers allow bigger plants like a five-foot tall ‘Early Girl’ tomato to grow and mature with plenty of room. A single chive or basil plant will grow fine in a small container. If in doubt about size ask your helpful Garden Center of Colorado sales associate for assistance. A handy resource to match edibles with container sizes, along with additional helpful hints can be found at <https://cmg.extension.colostate.edu/Gardennotes/724.pdf>

**Placement**

Plan where the container will be located, larger containers will be too heavy to move once planted. Drip trays with wheels can be placed under containers if they need to be repositioned.

Sun location is important for the health and growth of the plants. Match the sun exposure with what you will be growing. Vegetables and fruits such as tomatoes, peppers, squash, and strawberries will need 8 hours of full sun a day. Root vegetables like beets and carrots require 6 hours of sun. Many herbs and leafy greens will grow with 4 hours of sun each day.

**Plant**

Begin each outdoor season with clean and sterilized containers, drip trays and plant supports. Plant diseases can carry over from year to year in the potting soil, container, and cages. Use a one to ten bleach/water solution or Lysol type product to sterilize empty pots and supports. Rinse them very well with water after wiping or spraying.

Always use potting soil that is free of diseases, insects and weeds, and never use soil from outside, it is too heavy and may harbor pest insects and disease.

Container potting soil is sold by the bag at your local Garden Center of Colorado. These mixes are sterile and lightweight making them perfect for use in a container. Choose from a wide variety of quality brands.

Start each new outdoor edible growing season with fresh potting soil. If not possible, do your best to replace the top several inches in the container with new soil, fluff it up with trowel and be sure all previous season’s foliage and roots are removed.

When planting your container have all your supplies at hand. This includes the potting soil, fertilizer, plants, seeds, supports and watering can.

First, cover the container drainage holes with something that allows water out but keeps the soil inside, my preference is a coffee filter or small piece of screen.

Fill the container halfway to three-quarters with soil, then mix in slow release dry or pelleted fertilizer (per package instructions). Liquid fertilizers can be used later in the growing season once the plants are growing. Hold off on initially adding fertilizer if the potting soil already contains fertilizer. These types of potting mixes will give your plants approximately four to six weeks of slow-release fertilizer, so none is needed at planting.

The goal in planting the edible to your container is to plant it at the same soil line level as it was growing in the purchased pot from the garden center or from your home if grown inside.

Remove the plant from the pot it was growing in and position it in your container. Add more potting soil all around the plant’s root ball until the soil is 2-3 inches from the top of the container. Leaving room at the top prevents soil and water from spilling over. Place cages and trellises over newly planted edibles immediately after planting.

Once planted, water the container until water comes out the drainage holes. The potting soil may settle after the initial watering, so feel free to add more potting soil to keep the plant roots covered.

Direct seeding in a container is economical and easy. Fill the container with potting soil just like above. On the top of a filled container, sprinkle or place the seeds in rows, then add a light layer of additional potting soil over the seeds. Larger plants like squash only require one or two seeds depending on the container size. Use a gentle spray to water the seeds, a strong blast can displace them. Newly planted seeds need consistent moisture to germinate.

**Care**

* Check containers daily to see if they need water. Watering needs will be less early in the season when temperatures are cooler.
* When dry an inch or so below the soil surface it’s time to water.
* Very dry soil will shrink away from the sides, try not to let this happen.
* Edible containers will need more attention than ornamental plants. If edible containers dry out too much or often, health and yields will suffer.
* Fertilize edibles once a week with half to less strength through the entire growing season. A steady supply of fertilizer is required for container grown plants due to nutrient loss from frequent watering.

Betty Cahill is a freelance writer and garden instructor. She’s written the popular garden "Punch List" column for the Denver Post for eight years. Betty has been teaching gardening classes around the metro area since the early 2000s. For additional gardening tips, information and garden stories, follow her on her blog at <http://gardenpunchlist.blogspot.com/>.

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