

Growing Vegetables in Containers

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Almost everyone has enough space to grow their own vegetables. Even if you do not have the sufficient yard space for large garden, but have an area in your yard or on the patio that receives 6-8 hours of sun, you can grow vegetables. Growing plants in containers, or minigardening as it is sometimes called, can be a rewarding hobby for all ages.

The first step of minigardening, is to decide which vegetables you wish to grow. Keep in mind that different vegetables grow during different months here in central Florida and it is important to plant them during the right time. For example, in February, cucumbers, eggplant, lettuce, peppers, and tomatoes can be planted. In the summer, we grow okra, southern peas, and sweet potatoes.

Once you decide which vegetables you would like to grow, you can select your containers. A wide assortment of containers can be used, from hanging baskets and flower pots to tubs and paint buckets. Most any container is suitable as long as it is durable, large enough for the plant to grow, and has good drainage. Container selection is only limited by your imagination. If the container does not have drainage holes, punch or drill some in the bottom. Drainage holes allow excess water to drain easily from the containers, so the plants do not get too wet.

To give you an idea on the size of container you may need, a container that is 6 inches in diameter and 6 inches tall is large enough for radishes and lettuce; one that is 10 inches in diameter and 10 inches tall is suitable for bell peppers and carrots; a 13 inch diameter container by 10 inches tall (5 gallon bucket) is needed for tomatoes.

Fill the containers with a premixed potting soil that is available at any garden supply store. Do not use topsoil or only compost for the plants, as these materials are not suitable on their own for the overall health of the plants.

Plant your containers by using seeds or small plants you purchase at the garden center. The rule to planting seeds is to plant no deeper than 2x the diameter of the seed. Seeds can be planted so deep that the young plants may never reach the top of the ground. Or they can be planted too shallow that they could be washed away with the first rain or irrigation, or be eaten by birds and other critters. For example, bean seeds are approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ inch in diameter; therefore they should be planted approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ inch deep. For tiny seeds, gently press them into the soil or sprinkle soil on top.

Water is essential for growing vegetables; however, too much water can be devastating causing disease and your plant to rot. You can easily tell if your plants need water by feeling the soil an inch or two below the surface. If the soil is dry, it's time to water. Do not allow your plants to wilt.

Feed the plants by using a slow release or water soluble fertilizer. No one nutrient solution is superior, however, selecting one labeled for vegetable plants will supply the proper nutrients for the better blooming and fruiting. Make sure to follow the directions on the fertilizer label and apply at recommended rates and recommended intervals. More is not better when it comes to fertilizer.

Examine your plants frequently, looking for insects and disease. When pests are present, spray only affected plants. Make sure that all chemicals that are used on the plants are labeled for vegetable plants. Follow the label directions for application amounts and timing. More is not better and may actually damage your plants.

Growing your own vegetables is fun. It provides many benefits, including fresh air, sunshine, exercise, enjoyment, mental therapy, fresh vegetables, and economic savings. It's very rewarding to eat a vegetable directly from your garden, knowing the hard work and enjoyment that was put into its growth.

For more information on vegetable gardening in central Florida, contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000. They are available to take your calls Monday thru Friday from 9am to 3pm. You may also email me at jwel2@osceola.org.