

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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The snow has hardly melted from the ground and a chill is still in the air but the days are getting longer and the seed catalogs are piling up. The urge to get out there and start planting is overwhelming.

If tending a big vegetable garden is not practical at this time in your life, why not grow a few vegetables in containers? If your space is cramped, your time limited, or you are just not physically up to tending a huge vegetable plot, container gardening is a simple way to enjoy some fresh vegetables grown right outside your door. The best choices are ones that grow quickly like lettuces, mesclun, radishes, spinach, onions or chard. Even slower developing vegetables such as peas, and beets do well in containers.

The container can be made of many materials. Clay or terra-cotta pots are fragile, heavy to move and they are porous. Soil moisture evaporates from them rapidly. You will need to water more often. Plastic containers are unbreakable and nonporous. They are ideal for container gardening but many find plastic is not aesthetically to their liking. Wood containers are often beautiful to look at but can be as heavy as clay and will rot out in time. Paper pulp pots are light weight but short lived. Metal, concrete and wire containers have not proved practical. Grow bags, which is an idea introduced from Europe that is gaining some acceptance here in America, are large bags of commercial potting soil. Slits are cut in them and plants are planted in the slits and grown directly in the bag. This works well for smaller shallow rooted plants. The bags lay flat on the ground and root space is limited.

The planting medium should be rich and fine textured for good drainage. Bagged soilless potting mix from the garden center is your best choice for container gardening. A top quality potting mix does not need amending, although you may want to mix in granular organic fertilizer or a time-release fertilizer before planting. The soilless mix should contain either dark brown peat moss or ground bark, perlite, vermiculite or pumice and smaller amounts of various other ingredients like earthworm castings, compost and sand. Read the ingredients listed on the bag. The mix should not contain big chunks of bark or other material.

Once you have the containers and have filled them with potting mix it is time to think about what to plant. Lettuce and other leafy greens can be seeded directly into the soil or started in flats and transplanted. They are considered a "cool weather" crop and do much better in early spring or the cooler fall season. Mesclun is a popular mix of salad greens with differing flavors, textures, and colors. It makes a very appealing salad. In the market these mixes are put in little plastic bags and sold for very high prices. Think how nice it would be to step outside your door and clip a few leaves for your evening salad! Other vegetables you can start from seed are beets and carrots or you can purchase starts of onions, peas, peppers, and tomatoes and plant them in your containers. Tomatoes need room for deep roots, five gallon buckets work well. Some vegetables need partial shade and cooler temperatures. Containers can be placed according to the requirement of the plants they hold. Lettuces, radishes, spinach and chard all need to be cooler. When the extreme hot weather sets in, the cool season vegetables will bolt or go to seed. You can try these again the fall. In fact you can keep some of the cool weather greens growing well into the winter months. A round container works well for this. Sow seeds or set out transplants in late August. Make rings of plants in a bulls-eye pattern, alternating leaf colors and textures. Harvest the oldest or outer leaves first by clipping them with scissors. The plants will continue to grow new leaves. Start small with one or two containers to see how your garden grows!

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