

Vertical Gardening

Think you don't have enough space to grow a lot of plants? Tired of looking at that boring garage wall? Sore back from bending over to weed your flower beds? Need a little shade or more privacy from your neighbors? Then grow up! Vertical gardening is more than growing wisteria on an elaborate arbor or hanging a basket of petunias from the eaves—it adds a whole new dimension to your landscape.

Vertical gardening is a great option (and may be the only option) for small yards, but even those with lots of space can enjoy the advantages of growing plants up rather than out. And there are many advantages. You can use vertical plantings to disguise unattractive parts of your landscape, such as a chain link fence, blank wall, or compost pile. Tall, columnar trees can provide privacy and shade or block wind, and trellises can define garden "rooms" or add a focal point to a flowerbed.

Vertical gardens are convenient and can be accessed by all gardeners, regardless of their abilities. The plants are at eye level, making it easier to prune, check for pests, and harvest fruit and vegetables. Beautiful blooms and fragrant flowers are more enjoyable when you don't have to get down on your hands and knees.

Growing up can be good for your plants, too. Air can circulate better around them, which can mean less disease, mildew, and fungus. Some pests don't crawl vertically, so you may be able to avoid them. Vegetables and fruits that are not lying on the ground will be cleaner and less likely to rot; and yield per square foot of garden space will be greatly increased.

But, there are also a few disadvantages to vertical gardening. Tall plants or those on structures will cast shadows, so you will need to put shade-tolerant plants near them and make sure nearby plants get enough sunlight. Plants that are grown vertically are often exposed to more sun and wind, so they can dry out quickly. They may need more frequent watering and fertilizing.

Structures and Containers

Many gardeners who grow plants vertically do so by using some type of structure or container. Commonly used structures include trellises, pyramids or tripods, arches and arbors, gazebos, walls, fences, and wire cages. Many of these structures can add architectural interest to your garden and may even add value to your home.

Choose your support structure based on the type of plants you want to grow on it. Wisteria or large tomato plants will require more sturdy structures than a flimsy vine or row of peas will. Some plants, such as climbing hydrangea, require nothing more than a wall to climb on, but most plants will need to be fastened to the support structure. Be sure to put your support structure in place and anchor it securely before you plant to prevent damage to the plants.

Trellises can be made or purchased in many shapes and sizes, from miniature ones for a container to models large enough to cover an entire wall. They are often staked directly into the ground or attached to an exterior wall

of the house or garage. If you put a trellis against a wall, be sure to leave some space between the trellis and the wall for air circulation.

Arches and arbors can be used to define areas of your garden, such as an entry point. Arbors are often built large enough to cover a patio, and these can usually support grape or wisteria vines, as well as climbing plants and hanging baskets.

Vertical gardening is an ideal way to hide an ugly fence. Fences can support vining plants or espaliered fruit trees, or they can be disguised with columnar trees or tall plants, such as sunflowers.

Of the containers available for vertical gardening, hanging baskets are by far the most popular. Hanging baskets, sometimes called hay baskets, can be hung on arbors, roof overhangs, or other structures that are strong enough to support them. Hang plants where they will receive morning sun and where you won't forget to water them. For those with physical limitations in reaching, pulleys and ropes can be installed to enable the gardener to lower the plants for watering or to simply enjoy. For more information about hanging baskets, see [Hanging Baskets](#).

In addition to hanging baskets, try grouping several tall containers or urns in a corner of your porch or patio. Or purchase containers that have one flat side, which are intended to be mounted to a wall or fence. Shelves fastened to blank walls are another great way to display lots of containers in a small area. And don't forget window boxes—they don't take up any garden space at all!

Plants

There are several things to keep in mind when choosing plants for vertical gardening: exposure, size, and maintenance. It seems obvious, but you need to select plants that will thrive in the conditions they will encounter in your garden. Will you be growing them over an arbor in full sun or in the shade of a trellis or fence? Will they be exposed to wind? If you intend to grow plants against an existing wall, will that wall reflect or radiate too much heat for that type of plant?

Also consider how long the plants will live and what their mature size will be. Annuals will grow fast but usually not very large. And they will grow for only one season, so your vertical garden will be bare for part of the year. Perennials can get quite large, and those that are long-lived, such as wisteria, can become very heavy and will need sturdy support.

Maintenance is something you should not overlook. Much of your vertical garden will be at eye level, so you will want to keep it tidy. Some vines, such as grapes and clematis, require annual pruning. Hedges or columnar trees may also need to be trimmed to keep their shape. Many plants will need to be tied to their support structure as they grow.

Containers need to be watered daily and sometimes more often in hot weather. Flowering plants may need fertilizing, as well as deadheading.

The most popular plants for vertical gardens are vines. Vines climb by means of tendrils, twining, or clinging, and will need an appropriate structure or support for the way they grow. Those with tendrils, such as pole beans, do well on a trellis or tripod, while those that twine will need a wire or string to twist around. Vines that cling will adhere to almost any rough surface, but can damage paint, wood, and mortar. Some plants, climbing roses and

tomatoes for example, have long stems that will ramble over the ground if not tied to a support. Also, keep in mind that some vines can be invasive; others may be poisonous.

Many vegetables can be grown vertically including pole beans, peas, cucumbers, melons, tomatoes, pumpkins, and squash. Make sure you buy the vining varieties of beans, peas, cucumbers, and squash, not the bush varieties. Small-fruited varieties of squash, melons, and pumpkins are usually the best choice for vertical gardens. Most vegetables will need some kind of support structure. Pole beans, which can climb to more than six feet, do well on a tripod, trellis, or arbor. Members of the cucurbit family (cucumbers, pumpkins, zucchini, squash) as well as melons, can grow up to 25 feet long, and their heavy fruits may need to be supported in "slings" made from old pantyhose or rags (or fancy patterned fabric if you prefer). Tomatoes (choose indeterminate varieties) are often tied to and supported by sturdy wire cages.

To add vertical elements to your landscape without using structures, try upright narrow plants or columnar evergreen trees. Or plant tall-growing ornamental grasses or columnar apple trees. For more ideas, check out gardens around your neighborhood or go to a local nursery. Experiment with different sizes and shapes of both structures and plants. Even if you're limited to a 3-foot-wide strip along a fence, you'll be amazed at the amount of vertical gardening you can do. You will soon be telling others to "just grow up"!

References

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