WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
PIERCE COUNTY EXTENSION
Master Gardener Program

RS 004-2010

Container Vegetable Gardening

If your vegetable gardening is limited by insufficient space or an unsuitable area, consider raising fresh, nutritious, homegrown vegetables in containers. A window sill, a patio, a balcony or a doorstep will provide sufficient space for a productive mini-garden. Problems with soil-borne diseases, nematodes or poor soil conditions can be easily overcome by switching to a container garden.

Containers

Almost any type of container can be used for growing vegetable plants: bushel baskets, drums, gallon cans, tubs or wooden boxes. The container size will vary according to the vegetable selected and space available. Pots from 6 to 10 inches in size are satisfactory for green onion, parsley and herbs. For vegetable such as tomatoes, peppers and eggplant, 5-gallon containers are the most suitable size. They are fairly easy to handle and provide adequate space for root growth.

Drainage is a necessity for successful yields. Add about 1 inch of coarse gravel in the bottom of the container to improve drainage. The drain holes are best located along the side of the container, about 1/4 inch to 1/2 inch from the bottom.

Soil

Always use potting soil in your containers. Do not use soil from your yard or garden. Select a bagged soil that contains organic material like peat moss or vermiculite. These amendments allow potting soil to retain moisture, maintain air spaces and allow roots to grow quickly and easily

Light

Most vegetable plants grow best in full sunlight. However, leafy crops such as lettuce, cabbage, greens, spinach and parsley can tolerate more shade than root crops such as radishes, beets, turnips and onions. The root vegetables can stand more shade than those which bear fruit, such as cucumbers, peppers, tomatoes and eggplant. One advantage to container gardening is mobility. Container gardening makes it possible to position the vegetables in areas where they can receive the best possible growing conditions.

Vegetable Selection

Almost any vegetable that will grow in a typical backyard garden will also do well as a container-grown plant. Check for vegetable varieties developed specifically for container gardens or have a bush habit. Large vegetables (i.e., pole beans and cucumbers) require more space and support for their vine growth. Some vegetables (i.e., cherry tomatoes) grow well in hanging pots.

Seeding and Transplanting

Most vegetables can be seeded directly into the container. Follow the seed packet instructions for planting depth. Crop yields will be increased by closer spacing. A good

3049 S 36th Street Suite 300, Tacoma WA 98409-5739
253-798-7180 FAX: 253-798-3165 1-800-992-2456 (choice 7) TDD 1-800-833-6388 PierceCounty@wsu.edu

rule to follow is to grow plants at the distance recommended for space "in rows" on seed packets, and ignore the recommendation for space "between rows." Offset the seeds. Generally, spacing plants closer will result in a higher total harvest of slightly smaller individual plants. List below are some ideas of what can fit into difference pot sizes:

In a 6-inch or 1-gallon pot: 1 lettuce or chard plant; 6-8 radishes or green onions; 3 spinach plants, or chives, parsley or dill.

In a 5-gallon bucket: 1 tomato, pepper or zucchini; 3-4 lettuce; 1 cabbage or broccoli (with 15 radishes or 8 spinach); 15 carrots or beets; 6 bulbing onions, garlic or leeks; 8 mustards or turnips for greens.

In a half whiskey barrel: 10-12 lettuce; 60 radishes or green onions; 50 carrots or beets; 3 broccoli or cabbage (with several spinach); a whole salad: 4 lettuce, 1 cherry tomato, 8 carrots, 12 radishes and 12 green onions.

Starting plants inside early and moving them outside as weather permits is a good way to get early crops of many plants. Remember to condition (harden) the plants to withstand the cold and wind, or they will suffer permanent damage from the change. Put the plants in a protected area and bring back inside at night for several days.

Watering

Containers require more frequent watering than plants grown in the ground. Plan to water once a day and possibly twice a day on hot summer days.

To check if a container needs watering, stick a finger 2 or 3 inches into the soil and see if it is moist. If it is dry, water! If there are seeds growing, the soil should be moist all the way up to the surface. Check every day until you get a good sense of how often your plants need water.

Potting mixes can be difficult to rewet once they dry out. If the soil is still dry an inch or two down even though it is draining out the bottom, try breaking up the top layer with your fingers or a trowel, poke some holes a few inches down, and then water again.

Fertilizer

Plants obtain nutrients from the soil and water around their roots. In containers, space and nutrients are limited, and need to be replaced curing the growing season. You can use liquid (i.e., fish emulsion), dry or timed-release fertilizers. Follow direction on the label

Diseases and Insects

Container-grown plants are susceptible to the same insect and disease problems as any other crops. Weeds can take over potted plants, robbing your crops of needed nutrients and sunlight. Fortunately, weeds are easier to control in containers than in open garden spaces. Pulling young weeds or shallow cultivation are the best controls. Herbicides are not appropriate.

Harvesting

Seed packets provide information on when to plant and how long it will take until harvest. For the greatest amount of enjoyment from a container garden, harvest the vegetables at their peak of maturity when a vegetable's full flavor has developed.