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A Garden of Eating

By Cynthia Brian



A colleague of mine was speaking to a company about reducing stress and suggested that everyone place a potted plant on their kitchen windowsill, work desk, or patio. A few months later he met a member of the audience who was profuse with his thanks. "Ever since you proposed pot plants nearby, I have been very relaxed." "I said potted plants not pot plants," replied my friend.

Container gardening is the non-gardener's answer to the big backyard gardens of yesteryear. Everybody benefits from a little patch of land, even if that earth exists only in a simple clay pot. You don't need a potager (a French kitchen garden) or a half-acre to grow your own herbs and vegetables. With limited space, window boxes, balconies, doorsteps, and porches become your edible Edens.

Five easy ingredients are all it takes to grow a mini garden full of tasty delights.

Containers: Anything that can hold soil and water will work well. You can purchase decorative containers in a variety of sizes, shapes, colors, and textures or you can recycle unlikely items for more of a unique design statement. I grow herbs and plants in old cowboy boots, coffee mugs, shells, wine boxes, tea pots, toys, and even hats. Drainage is critical, especially for any vessel without a bottom hole. Add an inch of gravel or packing pebbles to the bottom of any containers to improve the drainage. Water damages surfaces. Provide saucers.

Soil: Synthetic "soils" are best suited for growing vegetables and herbs in pots. Purchase pre-made bags or make your own by mixing sawdust, wood chips, peat moss, perlite, vermiculite, fertilizer, or other organic mediums. Mixtures must be free of disease and weed seeds, have the ability to hold moisture and nutrients, be lightweight, and drain well. Before planting, water the new soil thoroughly.

Sun: Growing herbs or vegetables requires sunshine. Make sure to position your planters in a non-drafty area receiving five to six hours of sun daily. A south, southeast, southwest, or west location is ideal.

Seeds: Whether you choose seeds or small plants, you'll want to choose herbs or veggies that won't grow too tall or too wide and don't have a deep rooting system. My favorites are parsley, mint, basil, chives, sage, thyme, dill, strawberries, and lavender. I have had success in growing tomatoes, eggplant, lettuce, cabbage, and peppers in containers on my porch. If you have vertical space on a balcony or patio, pole beans are fun while cucumbers and squash can be trained to trail. For great barbecue flavors, keep a wagon of herbs and vegetables within rolling distance.

Water: Herbs and vegetables drown when water-logged. Water sparingly - once a week during cooler seasons; in hot weather, once a day is sufficient. Poor drainage kills plants while wet leaves encourage disease. Be diligent. Feed once a month with a fertilizer designed for edibles.

There is nothing better than plucking a few leaves from your aromatic herbs or fresh food growing in your personal paradise to add flavor and health to your cuisine. Potted plants near your working environment decrease stress to improve your happiness quotient. Plant your own garden of eating today. Bon appetite!

Happy Gardening to you!

Make sure to read Digging Deep-Gardening with Cynthia for more tips on gardening in Lamorinda.



Photo Cynthia Brian

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