

HOW TO: Grow Vegetables in a Container

Site Selection

Choose a location that gets at least 6-8 hours of sunlight a day with close access to water.

Container Selection

With a variety of materials and options available, choose a container that is big enough to grow what you like and not too heavy. Make sure the container has drainage holes to allow water to flow out to avoid disease issues.

Soil

Container gardens require well-draining media to grow in, made up of materials such as compost, sphagnum moss, and perlite. This media lacks soil, which is better for container gardens. When purchasing soilless media for container, look for potting soil mixes specifically made for growing in pots and containers.

Plant Selection

Pots have limited root space, so choose plant varieties that have been bred to do well in containers. Look for varieties such as “Patio Tomato”, or grow smaller plants like greens and peas. Make sure your container will have enough space to grow the vegetables you like, and do not overcrowd your container.



Maintenance

Container gardens will need to be watered and fertilized often. Expect to water your containers at least once a day when hot to prevent plants from wilting. Fertilize regularly once the plants are growing according to the instructions of your fertilizer.

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Veggies for Containers

Use this table as a guide for selecting vegetables recommended for growing in containers. This list is not complete, but rather suggestions for best success.



Plant Type	Container Size	Spacing	Notes
Beans - Bush	5+ gallon	2-3 plants per 5 gallon container	Bush beans won't need support for vining plant growth. Look for varieties that produce beans you're most likely to eat, such as fresh or dried.
Beans - Pole	5+ gallon	3-4 plants with trellis system per 5 gallon container	Pole beans will need a trellis system to support vining plant growth. Height depends on variety - make sure to check the seed packet.
Beets	1-3+ gallon	2-3" apart	Leaves are edible, and a few can be harvested from each plant while growing.
Chard	1-3+ gallon	2-3" for baby greens, 4-5" for larger leaves	Plants can be harvested throughout the growing season.
Cucumbers	5+ gallon	3-4 plants with trellis system per 5 gallon container	Cucumbers require a trellis system. Look for smaller, bush varieties for greater success. Will have higher water demands.
Eggplant	5+ gallon	1 plant per 5 gallon container	Look for patio varieties or smaller fruit. May require staking for plant support.
Lettuce	1-3+ gallon	10-18" apart for full headed varieties, 2-3" for baby leaf	If growing for baby leaf, plant closer and harvest regularly. If looking for full grown varieties, allow for more space and harvest from outside.
Peas	1-3+ gallon	1-3" apart with trellis system	Choose a variety that you're most likely to eat, such as shell, snap, or snow peas. Only grows in cool weather, so start early in growing season.
Peppers	5+ gallon	1-2 plants per 5 gallon container	Most peppers do well in containers, so choose a variety you're most likely to eat.
Potatoes	5+ gallon	1 plant per 5 gallon container	Mound potato plants in soil as they grow upwards. Choose smaller varieties, and harvest completely in fall before frost.
Radishes	1-3+ gallon	1-3" apart	Harvest earlier in the season to avoid overly spicy flavors. Quick growing.

Plant Type	Container Size	Spacing	Notes
Spinach	1-3+ gallon	2-3" for baby leaf, 12-18" for full plants	Plants grow best in cool weather, so plan for a spring and fall crop.
Tomatoes	5+ gallon	1 plant per 5 gallon container	Look for container/patio varieties. Will need to support plant growth.
Zucchini	5+ gallon	1 plant per 5 gallon container	Look for container/patio varieties. Will have higher water demand throughout season.

Herbs

Plant Type	Container Size	Spacing	Notes
Basil	1-3+ gallon	1-2 per container	Pinch blooms from basil to prevent early blooming in warm weather.
Chives	1-3+ gallon	1-2 per container	Potential to keep growing back year after year if protected from harsh winter weather.
Cilantro	1-3+ gallon	1-2 per container	Cilantro seeds are also known as coriander.
Dill	1-3+ gallon	1-2 per container	Look for compact container varieties and focus on enjoying flavorful leaves.
Marjoram	1-3+ gallon	1-2 per container	Similar to oregano with tender leaves, grows well in containers.
Mint	1-3+ gallon	1-2 per container	Easily grows in containers, with pollinator friendly blooms.
Oregano	1-3+ gallon	1-2 per container	Woodier growth, requires less water throughout growing season.
Parsley	1-3+ gallon	1-2 per container	Easily grows well in containers. Remove from the garden at the end of the year.
Sage	1-3+ gallon	1-2 per container	Requires less water throughout growing season.

All-American Selection Winners

These All-American Selections Winners grow particularly well in the Upper-Midwest. All-American Selections are grown and tested nationally and locally, providing reliable recommendations for your garden. The following are recommended vegetable varieties suitable for container growing.

Variety Name	Description	Container Size	Spacing	Notes
Sweetie Pie F1 Pepper (AAS Winner)	Miniature sweet bell peppers roughly 2.5x3" in size. Good flavor.	3+ gallons	2-3 feet (one/container)	Mini bells on compact plants are great for containers.
Winter Honeybaby F1 Squash (AAS Winner)	Vines grow 2-3'. Trellis in container. Produces compact orange fruit similar to butternut.	5+ gallons	2-3 feet (one/container)	This squash works because of its compact growing structure.
Flaming Jade F1 Pepper (AAS Winner)	Upright, serrano type pepper with great disease resistance.	3-5+ gallons	2-3 feet (one/container)	Compact, upright structure that's great for containers.
Hot Sunset F1 Pepper (AAS Winner)	Spicy, wax/banana pepper type with good flavor. Good grower.	3+ gallons	2 feet (one/small container)	Compact, upright structure that's great for containers.
Sweet Sunset F1 Pepper (AAS Winner)	Sweet, banana type pepper with high production. Good flavor.	3+ gallons	1-2 feet (one/small container)	Compact, upright structure that's great for containers.
Pick a Bushel F1 Cucumber (AAS Winner)	Compact bush-type with prolific growth. Vines grow up to 24". Trellis.	3-5+ gallons	8-10" (potential multiples per container)	The compact structure and short vines makes this good for containers.
Mountain Merit F1 Tomato (AAS Winner)	Flavorful slicer tomato with good disease resistance and flavor.	5+ gallons	2-3 feet (one/container)	Compact structure make this good for containers.

Sources:

["Top 10 Vegetables for Containers"](#) - Tammy Palmier with Missouri Botanical Garden

["Growing Vegetables in Container Gardens"](#) - University of Maine Extension by Associate Extension Professors Kathryn Hopkins, Donna Coffin, and Frank Wertheim, and Extension Agriculture