

CONTAINER GARDENING

# Easy and fun



*Container gardening teaches children the basics and rewards them with edible crops.*

by Deborah Roberts

Container gardening with edible plants is ideally suited for children of all ages. They will learn the basics of gardening — the importance of site selection, regular watering and feeding — and the joy of watching the plants they've pampered for weeks finally reward them with edible crops, all in a small, manageable space.

Children may also keep a gardening journal, look for recipes and help prepare a home-grown feast for the family dinner. You can grow a wide variety of vegetables, fruits, herbs, and even edible flowers in containers. Since all the possibilities are too numerous to discuss here, I'll give you some ideas for fool-proof plants to grow when beginning to explore the delights of edible gardening in containers.

Let's start with some basics. Almost anything can be used as a container for your edible garden — terra cotta pots, whiskey barrels, window boxes, or even a salvaged treasure. Container selection is a great place to let your kids stretch their imaginations. Before you add soil, just make sure it has drainage holes in the bottom. Most flowers and vegetables will grow well in a container that is at least 8 inches to 12 inches deep.

Now that you've chosen your containers, it's time for a trip to your local nursery to get supplies. You'll need a bag of high quality all-purpose potting soil, a slow-release granular fertilizer to mix in with the soil (follow label directions) and a water-based all-purpose fertilizer (labeled safe for edibles), which you'll apply to the plants weekly once they start actively growing. This is also a good time to let your child pick out some kid-friend-

ly gardening tools. The essentials include gloves, a trowel and an appropriately sized watering can.

Proper watering can be tricky for container gardens. Containers dry out quickly, especially in full sun. Soil should be checked for moisture at least once a day, and plants should be watered if the soil is dry an inch below the surface. Water thoroughly until water runs out of the bottom, however, don't leave the container standing in water.

Now for the hard part — deciding which edible plants you and your child will grow. Here are some general guidelines to think about when deciding what makes the most sense for your edible garden. Plants that flower and then produce the part we eat (beans) generally require at least six hours of sun each day to thrive. Plants whose leaves or roots we eat (car-

rots) typically need about four hours of sun per day. While children should definitely be involved in the decision about what to grow, doing your homework first and presenting suitable options will make the experience more rewarding for both of you. Since kids can be impatient and get easily discouraged, it's wise to choose edibles that grow quickly. Beans, carrots, lettuce, nasturtiums, and pansies are all great fast-growing plants.

## Beans

There are two categories of beans, pole beans, which require vertical support, and bush beans, which do not. Bush beans typically produce beans earlier than pole beans, but pole beans produce beans for a longer period of time. Most garden centers do not carry bean plants, so you may have to start them from seed. Children can plant seeds directly into the container once night temperatures stay above 60 degrees. Kids love growing purple-podded beans. The flowers are shades of lavender, and the pod is purple but turns green when cooked. For bush beans, try Purple Queen or Sequoia Purple. Try Purple King if you'd rather grow a pole bean.

## Carrots

There are so many varieties of carrots available that it can be overwhelming to decide which ones to grow. The best choices for a container will be labeled rounds or Nantes. Start seeds directly in your container. Try Thumbline or Sweet Baby Jane varieties; children love their unique shapes.

## Lettuce

For container gardening, it's best to stick with the loose-leaf category since it can be harvested one leaf at a time (as opposed to one head at a time for other ones). Snip off a few leaves for a salad, and others will grow in their place. Colorful varieties kids enjoy include Deer Tongue, Lolla Rossa and Red Sails.

Edible flowers are colorful, easy to grow and are good filler plants for your containers. They are an exciting addition to salads and make delicious sorbets. Remember, not all flowers are edible, so it's



**Beans, carrots, lettuce — plants that grow quickly — inspire impatient young gardeners.**

important to teach your child to check with an adult before tasting any.

## Nasturtiums

Both the leaves and flowers of nasturtiums are edible. Nasturtiums typically grow as either mounds or as vines (which need support). Flowers come in a rainbow of colors from bright orange and yellow to apricot, salmon or red. Choose a variety based on how well its color and growth habit will complement the other edibles you are growing.

## Pansies

Color is the name of the game with pansies. Again, choose a color to complement the other edibles in your container

garden. Pansies can tolerate cold weather better than other edible flowers, so they can be used to prolong the season of your edible garden.

Whether you start out with one small container or an entire collection, now is the perfect time to get started. Let your child have fun digging in the dirt, and you'll be amazed at what you will both discover. Who knew purple beans tasted so delicious?

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