

## Container Vegetables

Not all of us are blessed (*depending upon your point of view*) with lots of land to grow vegetables at home and you might not live close enough to an allotment or community garden.

Many, who have the space, may not feel they have the time to grow their own, particularly when veg can be picked up reasonably cheaply in supermarkets.

We all have reasons why we don't grow food but if it's something you've been thinking of having a go at this year, there may be a solution...

***Almost all vegetables can be grown in containers - as few or as many as suits your lifestyle.***



In fact if you're new to growing veg, having planters around your door or balcony might be just what you need to get you started. Once you've experienced the pleasures of harvesting your own food and eating it, who knows what'll happen next!

***So how do you go about it?***

✚ **Start with reliable, quick growing veg that you like to eat.....**

- Not essential but when looking through seed packets, look for varieties of vegetables that have been specifically bred to be grown in containers.
- Choose what you like to eat: rocket, radish or mixed lettuce, cherry tomatoes or baby carrots, peas or salad potatoes can easily be grown outside a sunny door.
- Bamboo or hazel canes can be decoratively tied in your container for growing mangetout, peas or runner beans.
- If you're pushed for time, buy some ready grown plants from a garden centre and plant them straight into your containers for instant gratification!
- Look out for the label CCU (Cut and Come Again), more common with varieties of lettuce. This means you can take a few leaves off each plant when you need them rather than harvesting the whole plant.

✚ **Use large containers - the bigger the better.**

They'll hold water for longer and therefore the compost won't dry out as quickly.





If you're on a tight budget and can't afford to buy new containers, keep your eyes peeled for items that can be recycled.

Old tyres, baths, toilets and sinks have all been used to grow plants in. Thick plastic ['laundry bags'](#) are great for growing potatoes, or brush up on your woodwork skills and have a go at making your own [window boxes](#) and planters (*you don't need expensive power tools highlighted in this clip, a hand saw will do*).

#### ✚ **Drainage. Lack of drainage can cause as many problems as lack of water**

Water must be able to escape from the container so it's important to ensure there's adequate drainage. Most shop bought containers already have holes in them, or marks where you can punch the holes out. If you're making do you may need to make holes in your bag or container near the base (*a masonry drill set at slow speed will work on earthenware, place tape on the surface before drilling*).

Once you have holes in your container you can add 'crocks' to the base. We save all our broken cups, mugs and plates for this purpose, and are often reminded of old favourites when we clean them out again.

If you haven't got anything broken to hand, a layer of washed gravel or chippings works well. Placing crocks over the holes will stop the compost from blocking them.

#### ✚ **Potting mix**

I've successfully grown vegetables in multipurpose compost and grow bags but being 'soilless' and peat based they **dry out quickly** and [as highlighted by Gardeners World](#), contribute significantly to global warming. Peat free organic alternatives are now a readily available alternative but are generally more expensive.

Many gardeners swear by potting mixes that are John Innes based. These have been devised at the [The John Innes Centre](#) and each has different component mixes.

They're loam (soil) based with different quantities of loam, limestone and peat, depending upon their usage. So, for example, John Innes Seed Compost is for growing seedlings and John Innes No 1 more suitable for slow growing plants or tiny spring seedlings. No 2 is the general multi-purpose compost but No 3, a stronger mix, would be ideal for strong growers such as tomatoes, or sweet peas.

Whichever potting mix you choose, or is available to you, it's important that it's fresh and disease free. Buy your compost from a supplier that has a fast turnover and when you get it home, once opened it's recommended to store it in a plastic bag in a frost free place. Always use fresh compost for seedlings, or they can suffer a disease called damping off (*where they just flop over and die*).



#### ✚ **Why use compost rather than garden soil?**

Garden soil will vary in its pH (*acidity/alkalinity*), is likely to contain weed seeds, may contain disease spores and will vary in its nutrient levels.

Finally on this point, and just to take any confusion away, the compost created on a heap in your garden is different from the compost that you buy in a bag.

### ✚ Watering

Container plants will require regular watering, and if it's a particularly hot summer that could mean up to twice a day.

There are a few things you can do to ease this burden.

- Set up an irrigation system. Simple drip feed irrigation kits are now readily available and getting cheaper every year.
- Look out for window boxes that contain built in reservoirs.
- Stand plants on trays lined with capillary mats or wet sand.

### ✚ Feeding.

Generally, potting mixture contains enough nutrients to last a few months. However if you notice a check in growth, or you've planted particularly 'hungry' feeders in your containers, liquid seaweed is full of nutrients and trace elements and can be watered into the soil in the containers.

Anything else to watch out for?

We have a cat who LOVES to sleep in containers full of lovely, warm compost, not caring a hoot whether it has tiny little carrot seedlings growing in it!

