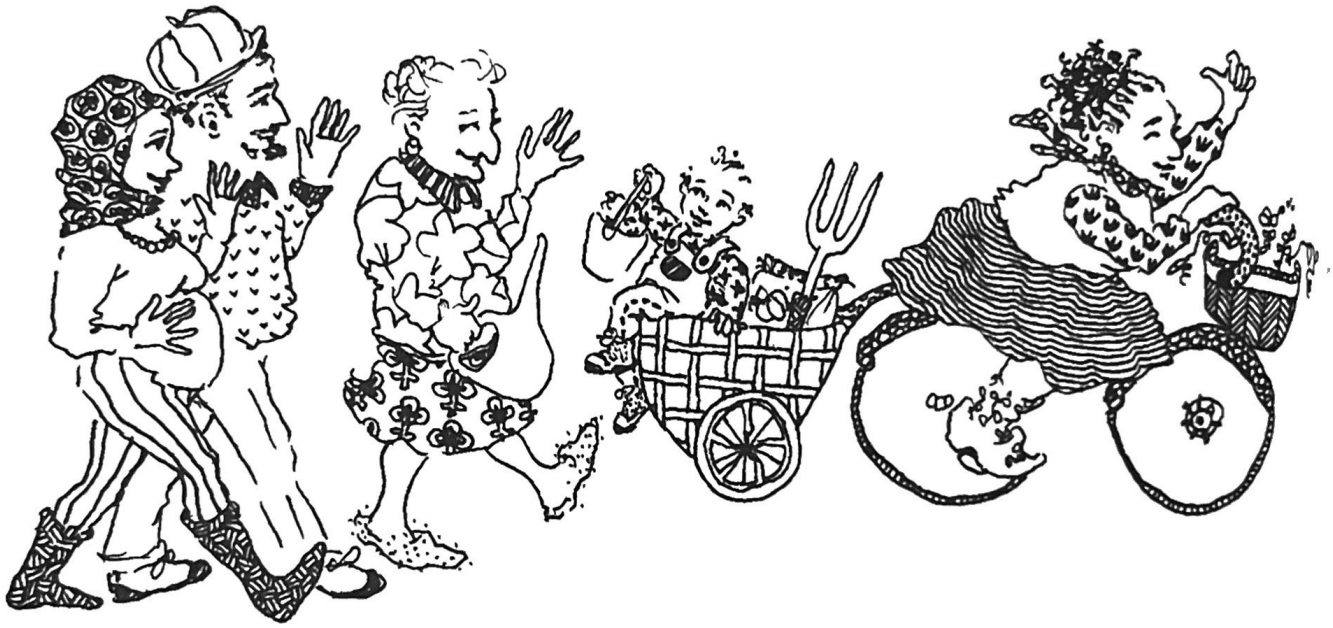
Our Food, Our Right

Recipes for Food Justice

4 EATING WITH YOUR HANDS: DIY GARDENING AND FOOD PRESERVATION



Container-Gardening: How to Eat Out of Your Bookshelf

Laura A. Brady

City-dwellers often have the misinformed impression that growing food is something that can only happen out in the country on rolling, rich fields.

In reality, you can tend your own bountiful garden just about anywhere that sunlight reaches a few hours a day.

Apartment balconies, parking strips, driveways, rooftops, sunny windows — in the mind of an urban farmer, these are all fantastic sites for food production.

All you need is a container, some healthy soil, a water source (and place for water to drain), and seeds and/or plant starts. If you are on a limited budget, I'm happy to say that you can set up your own urban farm for next to nothing.

Step 1: Where to Break Ground, a.k.a Cement

The most important consideration for urban farmers is sunlight. Take a day or two to get to know your area. Pay attention to where your driveway gets the most sun throughout the day, or which windows in your house aren't blocked by shadows of nearby buildings. If you have a choice, orient your garden South-facing, so it will receive the most hours of direct sun throughout the day.

Step 2: Build Walls for Your Soil

There is no need to run out and buy containers, because you'll be surprised how many you can find for free. Deeper containers will allow you to grow a greater diversity of plants, but with a depth as shallow as 8 inches, you can still tend a successful garden.

Five-gallon buckets—Ask at restaurants and grocery stores to see if they throw away their extras.

Plastic storage bins—Check out garage sales, dumpsters,

roadsides, and online "free" exchange sites (see Resources section).

Plastic Bottles—A good technique if you have limited space and/or want to grow in your kitchen window.

Old tree pots and large nursery pots—Check out your local nurseries, many of whom have a "free pot area" or a dumpster full of pots (see Resources section for ideas).

Bookshelves, nightstands, and dresser-drawers—It's easy to find free ones on the side of the road. Lay them on their backs, and they provide ready-made walls for soil.

Old tires—Lots of people swear by stacked tires filled with dirt because the black rubber creates an amazing heat trap that plants love. If you decide to go for this option, be sure to line the inside with a few layers of plastic to avoid contaminating your plants with old road toxins.

Feed Sacks—Take a large feed sack (made of burlap or woven plastic), fill it with soil, tie the open end closed with twine or wire, and then lay it on its side. Cut 2-3 inch holes in the surface and plant right into the dirt. The bags typically need to be replaced every season, but you can recycle the soil.

Old 'Kiddie Pools'—Though shallow, these pools can grow a variety of vegetables (and strawberry plants love them!).

Scrap Lumber—In the city, it's everywhere! You can use it to build your own bed—and it's actually really easy and does not require any special carpentry skills. All you need is a drill, some screws (hammer and nails work too, but your bed might not last as long), and possibly a saw (if your salvaged wood pieces are too different in size). Just be sure that the wood is not treated with a sealant that could be toxic or coated with lead paint. Ideally, use untreated wood and treat it yourself with a garden-safe wood seal (widely available at lumber stores and hardware stores). It is not necessary to treat your wood, but it will drastically increase the life of your beds, especially in a wet climate like Seattle.

One other consideration with container choice is the heat of your area. Because you are gardening above the ground, plant roots receive more heat than they would normally. Thus, you need to be careful not to fry your plants if you are gardening in a hot climate. Thick wood is good at maintaining cooler soil temperatures, while black plastic traps heat (and will speed up plant production in cooler climates). Likewise, smaller containers dry out faster, so you may not want to use a container with less than an 8-12 inch diameter in hot regions.

Step 3: Prepare a Drainage System/ Dirt Trap
If you are using actual garden pots, this step may already be done for you.

If not, or if you are using old furniture, random plastic containers, or tires, you will need to design a system that allows water to drain so your plant's roots don't rot.

If your container has a bottom that will rest on the ground, drill or punch 2-3 cm holes (pencil or screwdriver width), spaced so that there are 2-3 holes per square foot, through the plastic or wood. For hard plastic containers, you can drill the holes just around the circumference of the bottom, every 8-12 inches.

If your container has walls but no bottom (such as a bookshelf with the back kicked-out), you will need to line the bottom to keep the dirt from flowing away when you water. If you have access to black mulching fabric, weed-proof landscaping cloth, or floating row cover, this works great (just ask at your local nursery or garden shop). If not, plastic is another good (and often free) option. You can use old (washed) shower curtains, or any other large pieces of plastic you can find. For both fabric and plastic, lay the material on the ground between your containing walls and staple it around the sides. Pull the material tight against the sides so that dirt won't sneak down and escape as you fill the container.

Some people also like to dump a layer of fine gravel in their chosen location and place the bottomless raised beds on top. The gravel helps with drainage, and with this method, the plastic lining may not be necessary.

Step 4: Get your Soil and Fill Up!
Choosing and locating soil can be one of the most intimidating parts of container gardening, but it doesn't have to be!

FARMY CHICKEN ROAST!

Chandler, Island Meadow Farm

This is my favorite way to eat a chicken. It lends itself well to sharing a big meal with friends- plus there is always leftovers & a nice big carcass for making stock or soup (see pg. 40).

Rub the chicken with salt and olive oil. Preheat the oven to 450F. Place the chicken in a Dutch oven, breast up. Surround it with a medley of vegetables & herbs. The more garlic the better!

One whole chicken, fresh or defrosted completely

Vegetables: potatoes, carrots, sun chokes, parsnips, rutabagas, turnips, celeriac, onions, garlic, shallots

If you are planning a small operation, or live in an apartment, buying soil in bags may be the easiest option, even though it is more expensive.

If you want free soil:
Get in the practice of regularly checking free sites on the internet (see Resources section). Especially in the Spring and Summer, people over-order soil and offer it for free (if you can take it away yourself). You can also try asking soil companies to donate soil if you know that your garden is going to benefit the greater community.

If you can pay for soil:
You can buy soil from a garden-shop or directly from a soil-provider. Unless you plan on ordering more than 4-6 cubic-yards (or you can pay large delivery fees for less soil), you will need to pick it up yourself.

What kind of soil?
Garden shops and soil-providers usually have a 'garden mix' or 'topsoil mix' that is appropriate for vegetable gardening. However, be sure to ask if it is the best option for container gardening, because sometimes they have special soil blends that are specifically designed for this purpose. *Container gardens need soil that absorbs moisture and drains quickly - different requirements than typical garden soil.* Thus, in most cases, a "potting soil" is what you want. Topsoil will work in large raised beds, but is not ideal for small containers.

Ask your source where the soil components originate, and if the mix is organic. Though you may pay more for organic, it is definitely worth the money, because non-organic soil components have been known to include ground-up tires and toxic fertilizers. A good place to start is with the company that composts city waste, if your city offers this service. Here in the Seattle-area, Cedar Grove composts our yard-waste and food scraps and is thus a great organic, ethical provider. By buying their product, you are using compost made from the very waste this city produces—talk about local soil!

Step 5: Plant Your Seeds!
Planting in containers isn't really much different from

Container Garden, Laura Brady

salt, pepper and olive oil
white wine to taste
sprigs of rosemary, thyme, oregano

For the Sauce:
1/2 cup fresh cream or fresh whole milk
1/2 cup white wine

Put it in the oven, cover off, for 10 minutes (longer if the chicken is more than 4 pounds). Flip the bird, cook another 10 minutes. Turn the oven down to 375F, cover the pot, cook for about an hour or until the meat is done to your liking. The vegetables give you an idea of how much more time is needed.

I love to make a sauce after the chicken (and some or all of the vegetables) are removed from the pot. In a saucepan combine a 1/2 cup of wine and a 1/2 cup of cream or whole milk. Cook down the mixture for 10-15 minutes, or longer if you have the time—I never do because I am so hungry by this point I can't wait any longer! Feeds 3-5 people

planting a garden directly in the earth. However, you may want to take some of the following items into consideration:

How deep is your container? If it is shallow (8-12 inches), you may want to avoid deep-rooting plants like cucumbers, summer squash, and potatoes. The following chart from the Los Angeles County Cooperative Extension provides recommendations on vegetable crops specific to your container depth.

You may also want to select dwarf and high-yielding vegetable varieties, avoiding "whopper" varieties, which may not flourish in shallow containers.

Easy plants to begin with are lettuce and salad greens, radishes, bok choi, green onions, and kitchen herbs.

Step 6: Water, Water, Water!
There is no solid rule for how often you need to water your containers. A good strategy is to pass by every day and stick your finger an inch or two into the soil. If it is not damp at this level, you probably need to water.

Remember to water with a gentle spray hose or a watering can to avoid washing away your soil. Also, try not to water too late in the evening if nighttime temperatures drop significantly in your area, as plants can develop mildew and disease when their leaves remain wet in cold temperatures.

Step 7: Watch Your Plants Grow—and Fertilize Them!
Los Angeles County Cooperative Extension provides the following fertilization recommendations:

"Plants trapped in containers cannot search for nutrients with their roots. Confined root systems demand frequent light fertilizing in summer. Nutrients are leached from the soil with every watering and need to be replenished regularly."

Two to four weeks after planting, begin applying a water soluble fertilizer mixed half strength. Continue to apply fertilizer every two to three weeks unless you supplement the soil with a slow release fertilizer.

Organic gardeners can use liquid fish emulsion, liquid kelp , blood or bone meal. You will find 3 numbers on the fertilizer package that explain what the fertilizer is formulated to do. The numbers are always in the following order:

Nitrogen · is for green leaves
Phosphorus – is for flowers and fruit
Potassium – is for root growth

When one of the numbers is higher than the others, that means the fertilizer is designed to promote growth in that specific part of the plant.

Do not overfeed. A little is good, a lot is NOT better!"

Adding COMPOST to your containers over time is also important. A good guideline is to add 1/3 the containers volume in new compost after each harvest, or at least every year.

Step 8: Harvest Your Vegetables, and Enjoy!

Homegrown tomatoes, J.Khorsand

SEATTLE-AREA RESOURCES

Free Stuff
» *Yahoo.com 'Freecycle' group for Seattle (on-line networking site for exchanging goods, designed to minimize the waste of our society)*

FARMY CHICKEN SOUP
(for the next evening's meal)
Chandler

Boil the bones, meat, skin, and leftover scraps from the chicken carcass for 2 hours. Add white wine for a more complex flavor. Add salt, pepper and other herbs. While this is boiling, cut up vegetables. If you want a more broth-based soup, keep the vegetables to a minimum. For a stew, add more.

You can also add in cooked rice, beans or lentils.

bones, skin, meat, and leftovers from cooking a whole chicken

potatoes, carrots, sun chokes, parsnips, rutabagas, turnips, celeriac, etc.

onions, garlic,

» *Craigslist.com "Free" section (in the For Sale category)*

Soil
» *Cedar Grove Composting, 1-877-SOILS-4U (toll free)*
» *Pacific Topsoils Inc, (206) 418-1301*
» *Walt's Organic Fertilizer Co., waltsorganicfertilizer@yahoo.com, (206) 297-9092*
» *For 'bagged' soil, Seattle Tilth recommends: Cedar -Grove Potting Soil, Whitney Farms Premium Potting Soil, and Black Gold Organic Potting Soil*
Fertilizer (Recommendations from Seattle Tilth)
» *Fox Farm Tiger Bloom or Grow Big Organic Liquid Fertilizer*
» *Earth Juice Bloom or Grow Fertilizer*
» *Alaska Fish Fertilizer*
» *Age Old Organics Liquid Bloom and Grow*
» *Worm Tea Concentrate, sold by Squim Prairies Enterprises at the Ballard Farmer's Market and several local Seattle stores*

Garden Stores
» *Sky Nursery, 18528 Aurora Ave N Seattle, (206) 546-4851,*
» *Swanson's Nursery, 9701 15th Ave NW Seattle, (206) 782-2543*
» *City People's Mercantile, 5440 Sand Point Way NE, Seattle (206) 524-1200 and 2939 E Madison St, Seattle (206) 324-0737*
» *West Seattle Nursery, Inc, 5275 California Ave SW, Seattle, (206) 935-9276*
» *Magnolia Garden Center, 3213 W Smith St, Seattle, (206) 284-1161*

Free/Cheap Lumber Sources
» *Dunn Lumber, 3801 Latona Avenue N.E. Seattle, (206) 632-2129—excellent dumpster, with plenty of 'flawed' wood perfect for raised beds*
» *Construction Sites*—Peek inside their dumpsters: it's amazing how much good wood they throw away!
» *Seattle Department of Transportation (apparently sells used, wooden street sign posts, 4"X4"X8' for $1 each)*
» *Re-Store, 1440 NW 52nd St, Seattle, (206) 297-9119—Sells cheap salvaged wood*
» *Earthwise, 3447 4th Ave. S. Seattle, (206) 624-4510—Sells cheap salvaged wood*
» *Second Use, 7953 2nd Ave S Seattle, (206) 763-6929—Sells cheap salvaged wood*

Free Help and Advice
» *If you have any questions about buying soil and planting/maintaining your garden, call the Seattle Tilth Garden Hotline, sponsored by Seattle Public Utilities, at (206) 633-0224 or e-mail them, help@gardenhotline.org.*

Composting

Molly Woodring

Composting at home is a great way to turn kitchen and yard scraps into nutrient-rich soil and to keep all that "waste" from going to the landfill. It's easy, too! Here are some quick guidelines for what you can and cannot compost in your house:

Yes

yes

- Fruit and vegetable scraps, peels, etc.
- Tea bags and coffee grounds
- Egg shells
- Pet hair and dryer lint
- Weeds and small branches
- Napkins and paper towels

No

no

- Meat, bones, or dairy products (compost in city yard waste collection instead)
- Non-biodegradable items like twist ties, fruit stickers, etc.
- Pet waste

Since the organic materials mentioned above will rot without any human interference, the trick to composting is to speed up the process by making sure that conditions are ideal for aerobic decomposition. This keeps the compost from smelling and makes sure that the process is efficient. The two main things to remember are:

Try to maintain a ratio of about five parts carbon-rich brown materials, like dead leaves or paper products, to one part nitrogen-rich green materials, like grass clippings and kitchen scraps.
Keep the compost aerated by turning it regularly and by alternating layers of green and brown materials. This oxygen flow is essential to the decomposition process.

Outdoor Composting
If you have outdoor space, the easiest way to compost is passive composing. You can either heap the materials in a corner of the yard, build a structure to contain the pile, or buy a pre-made composter. This method works well for