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Ginger Flower Festival 2010 **Container Gardening with Annette McFarlane**

This presentation will cover the

- basics of container growing
- what to plant when in terms of vegetables and herbs
- demonstrate a salad box planting.

Why garden in containers?

There are several reasons why it may be advantageous to grow plants in pots.

Lack of space

Apartment dwellers may have no option but to garden in pots on verandas and balconies. Keep in mind, however, that within the grounds of many apartment blocks there are often gardens within the grounds of apartment blocks, which that the owners may be more than happy for you to use.

Shade

If buildings or trees shade your garden, growing plants in pots enables you to move them to situations where they will receive maximum sunlight.

Competition from trees

Many gardens planted with trees, or with trees planted in adjacent properties, suffer from root competition when vegetables are grown in conventional beds. Potted plants avoid this.

Soil-borne pests and diseases:

Some soil-borne pests and diseases are very persistent and gardeners may find it easier to grow certain crops in pots to avoid them. For example, in sandy soil, root knot nematodes can build up to high levels, making it difficult to grow good tomato crops. Growing tomatoes in pots can minimise this problem.

Modifying climate influences

Where the climate is less than ideal for growing a particular vegetable, it may be possible to grow it as a potted specimen by creating a microclimate for it. Chilli plants grown in cold climates can be moved to sunny areas during the day and then moved under cover to protect them from frost at night. Potted plants can be placed in glasshouses during very cold weather or under shade cloth during very hot weather.

When growing vegetables in pots always remember:

- Small pots dry out very quickly, so bigger is better when it comes to pot size.
- The minimum depth of containers should be 30cm.
- The roots of potted vegetables can overheat when pots are placed in the sun.
- Potted vegetables have a limited root zone from which to obtain their nutrients.
- You are responsible for providing all the nutrients your potted plants require as they cannot search out into the surrounding soil.
- Plants that you harvest (vegetables, herbs, fruit trees) have a much higher requirement for nutrients than ornamental plants because you must replace the nutrients taken away when you harvest.
- You must provide nutrients in addition to those provided by the potting mix.
- Some vegetables are more adapted for pot culture than others.
- Potted vegetables, herbs and fruit trees typically require more frequent watering than those grown in gardens.



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Productive space savers for pots or small gardens that can be planted now (February) include:

Asian brassicas & salad greens	Quick germination from seed and very fast-growing
Basella	Space-saving climbing spinach with bountiful leaf harvest
Beetroot	Occupies very little space and provide a leaf and root harvest
Chilli	Ornamental and productive
Cucumbers	Fast-growing, very productive, easy to grow vertically
Eggplant	Very productive in warm climates
Tomatoes	Long productivity, abundant harvest, can be grown vertically
Egyptian spinach	Attractive container plant with abundant leaf harvest
Garden sorrel	Perennial leaf harvest for salad and stir-fries
Surinam spinach	Hardy and attractive with continuous leaf harvest
Hibiscus spinach	Grow as a potted shrub for its leaf harvest
Lettuce	Non-hearting types can be harvested over a prolonged period
Radish	Occupy little space, fast-maturing
Basil	Very productive and versatile

Productive space savers for pots or small gardens that can be planted when the weather cools down (April) include:

English spinach	Productive over a long period with abundant harvest
French beans	Abundant harvest; can occupy vertical space
Mushrooms	Repeat harvest from a small space
Silver beet	Productive over a long period; abundant harvest
Snow peas	Longer harvest period than garden peas
Sprouting broccoli	Productive over a long period
Water chestnut	Will turn your ornamental water feature into a productive garden

If you need more information on planning planting and harvesting, check out my school gardening calendar www.annettemcfarlane.com/School Planting Guide.pdf. While the information concentrates on crops appropriate for school gardens, the information is applicable to home gardeners keen to get their 2010 planting and harvesting schedule on track.

Salad Box Gardening

Salad box gardening is my technique for helping novice gardeners achieve success in growing a simple container of salad greens.

You will need:

A polystyrene box with holes in the base or a plastic trough at least 30cm deep. Please note that polystyrene boxes last longer if they are painted with water based paint and because of their insulating qualities you can use quite shallow boxes that are lighter and easier to lift and move around than deep plants pots and troughs.

A small block of compressed coir or coco peat

Potting mix or compost

Organic fertiliser (like Seales 'Kick A Long' or Plant of Health 'Organic Link')

Liquid seaweed

Liquid organic fertiliser (or compost/weed tea, nutrient rich worm juice)

Wet newspaper

Four – six packets of seeds of leafy salad vegetables

Bowl or other container

Envelope or jar for storing seed

Scissors

Water and watering can



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Method

- Soak a small compressed block of coir or coco peat overnight in 3-4 litres of liquid seaweed that has been diluted according to the manufacturers instructions. Coir peat is a sustainable product made from coconut fibre and holds up to 50 times its weight in water.
- Line the base of your polystyrene box or container with about 6 sheets of wet newspaper (reduces drying out).
- Add the amount of fertiliser to your potting mix as recommended on the pack and mix through a couple of handfuls of coir. Break up the pre-soaked coir with your hands until it is fine and crumbly and gently squeeze out some of the excess moisture. Fill the container almost to the top with your combined mix.
- Use scissors to carefully open several packets of seeds (several different types of lettuce, basil, rocket and beetroot work well). Place the seeds in a bowl and mix. Place them in a new pack labelled, 'Salad Mix'.
- Level out the potting mix and water it to settle any air pockets.
- Sprinkle the equivalent of half a packet of seeds thinly over the top. This may be done randomly or in rows.
- Sprinkle a thin layer (10mm or less) of crumbled coir peat over the top of the freshly sown seed.
- Gently pat the coir down and ensure all the seed below is evenly covered.
- Water the seeds with liquid seaweed and rewater every day with seaweed until the seeds germinate.
- Once the seed germinates, water it at least once each week with liquid nutrients.

Start harvesting your salad leaves after three to four weeks. Use a pair of scissors to cut off the tops of the leaves just above the point where the leaves originate (like a supermarket mesclun mix). If the basal growing point is left in tact, these leafy greens will regrow. Each box can be cut back and reharvested several times.

If your salad box leaves start to get tall and thin, they need more sunlight. If your salad box leaves do not grow very quickly and start to go yellow, they need more or stronger liquid fertiliser (worm wee may not be sufficient).

When your salad box is exhausted, add the contents to your compost or worm farm and start again. Eventually you will have lots of recycled potting mix enriched with nutrients via your composting process and you will be able to fill the box with compost and avoid the cost and need to buy potting mix.

Send me one image (max 1mb) of your Salad Box Success. I might just put it up on the web for the world to see!

Did You Know?

My book on Organic Vegetable Gardening is currently on special through www.greenharvest.com.au.