

HOME-GARDEN

Front porch gardening: the art and science of gardening with limited space

Grace Elton Special to the Telegram & Gazette

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My backyard in Worcester is an oasis of shade. I have fun finding unique shade loving perennials and I challenge myself to have different plants blooming throughout the growing season. As much as I love the shade provided by the mature oaks and maples, after gardening in the shade for a few years, I missed having a vegetable garden. Most vegetables need 6-8 hours of sun each day, which my backyard can't provide. Luckily, I have a very sunny front porch. A few years ago, I dove into the method of growing vegetables in containers on my front porch. I've had successes and failures figuring out what grows best in containers for my particular growing conditions, and I've been so happy having home-grown vegetables again.

The process for growing porch vegetables starts like planning any vegetable garden. First, I assess my growing conditions, paying attention to how much sunlight each part of my porch gets throughout the day and choosing the sunniest spots to place my pots. I also try to choose locations that are protected from wind because containerized plants dry out much faster than plants in the ground. Then I choose which vegetables to grow. Of course, I start with which vegetables I most prefer cooking and then research which are best for containers. I also look into which vegetables are best grown from seed versus which are more successful when purchased as starts, or small plants. There are many plant sales each spring and I like to support organizations like the Regional Environmental Council who offer a wonderful variety of vegetable starts.

There is an art and a science to choosing the appropriate size container, but I like to think of it like a Goldilocks scenario. It needs to be big enough for the plant to form a robust root system, but not too big because excess soil can get waterlogged causing roots to rot. For many vegetables, a three or five-gallon pot is just right. Besides size, you can really have fun choosing the style of containers. Anything will work from plastic nursery pots to decorative glazed pots. I like to use terra cotta pots and paint them with my daughter before we plant

them. Since the goal is to eat what I'm growing, I fill my pots with an organic container blend that is either all purpose or labeled for growing vegetables.

A staple in my porch veggie garden are tomatoes. Tomatoes are one of the types of vegetables that I buy as starts. I have grown them from seed, but the growing season is almost over by the time they start producing tomatoes. Chose determinate varieties rather than indeterminate, so you can plan for the final size of the plant. For support, a tomato cage can be put right in the pot. Smaller vegetable plants like peppers also work great in containers, as do leafy greens. I have long trough containers that I use for leaf lettuces and spinach.

Potatoes are also very successfully grown in containers. Grow bags or large nursery pots work well. The key is to choose a pot or grow bag deep enough to hill the potatoes as they grow. To do this, plant potatoes about two weeks before the last frost. Start with the seed potatoes at the bottom of the pot and cover them with a shallow layer of potting soil. As the shoots grow, add a few more inches of soil at a time until the soil reaches the top of the pot. Harvest by simply dumping the pot out in a wheelbarrow and sifting through the soil.

Herbs also do particularly well in containers. The beauty of herbs is that most are perennial and when grown in a container, can be brought indoors in the winter to use year-round. I like to have fresh basil, rosemary, and thyme on hand at all times for cooking.

A container vegetable garden provides flexibility, the ability to extend the season, and opportunities to try new vegetable crops. Best of all, it's a fun and rewarding experience for anyone who has wanted to grow their own veggies but is worried they may lack the space!

Gardening Central Mass. is written by New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill CEO Grace Elton and Director of Horticulture Mark Richardson. Located on 171 acres in Boylston. New England Botanic Garden creates experiences with plants that inspire people and improve the world. Learn more at www.nebg.org. The column is published on the third Sunday of the month.

