

Digging Deep with Goddess Gardener, Cynthia Brian

Garden of eating



Photo Cynthia Brian

Cynthia Brian and family share heirloom tomatoes with friends.

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The good news is you don't need a hectare to grow your own herbs and vegetables. With limited space, window boxes, balconies, doorsteps, and porches become your personal, edible Eden.

If you are wondering what is a potager or kitchen garden, the best description is that it is a place where you grow your own garden of eating. In other words, what do you want to bring into the kitchen? Fruit, herbs, flowers, and vegetables are all welcome in a kitchen garden. Kids are instilled with better eating habits as well as a love of gardening by giving them a small plot or pot to grow foods they want to eat. Whether you are a green thumb or a non-gardener, growing edibles in a container on your patio or deck next to the grill make the ingredients easier to use in your meal planning. Most people don't want to hike out to the back forty to harvest a handful of chives. Ornamental edibles are gorgeous and entertaining as herbs, flowers, and vegetables flow seamlessly together, attracting beneficial insects to keep the garden healthy and in balance.

Although it is too late this year to plant a kitchen garden for summer harvesting, the forthcoming fall offers the opportunity to plant winter crops. And by salivating now over the luscious summer offerings of tomatoes, peppers, zucchini, cucumbers, eggplant, and more, you can plan next spring's planting.

What do you need to grow a mini garden of tasty delights?

Containers: Anything that can hold soil and water will work well.

You can purchase decorative containers in a variety of sizes, shapes, colors, and textures or you can recycle unlikely items for more of a unique design statement. I grow herbs and plants in old cowboy boots, coffee mugs, shells, wine boxes, teapots, toys, and even hats. Drainage is critical, especially for any vessel without a bottom hole. Add an inch of gravel or packing pebbles to the bottom of any containers to improve the drainage. Water damages surfaces. Provide saucers to prevent runoff staining.

Soil: Synthetic "soils" are best suited for growing vegetables and herbs in pots. Purchase pre-made bags or make your own by mixing sawdust, wood chips, peat moss, perlite, vermiculite, fertilizer, compost, or other organic mediums. Mixtures must be free of disease and weed seeds, be able to hold moisture and nutrients, be lightweight, and drain well. Before planting, water the new soil thoroughly.

Sun: Growing herbs or vegetables requires sunshine. Make sure to position your planters in a non-drafty area receiving five to six hours of sun daily. A south, southeast, southwest, or west location is ideal. Most containers are easily moved from place to place. If very large or extra heavy, utilize the assistance of a hand truck.

Seeds: Whether you choose seeds or small plants, you'll want to choose herbs or veggies that won't grow too tall or too wide and don't have a deep rooting system. My favorites are parsley, mint, basil, chives, sage, thyme, dill, strawberries, and lavender. I have had success in growing tomatoes, eggplant, lettuce, cabbage, and peppers in containers on my patio. If you have vertical space on a balcony or porch, pole beans are fun while cucumbers and squash can be trained to trail. For great barbecue flavors, keep a wagon of herbs, specifically rosemary, within rolling distance.

Water: Herbs and vegetables drown when water-logged. Water sparingly. Once a week during cooler seasons or in hot weather, once a day is sufficient. Poor drainage kills plants while wet leaves encourage disease. Be diligent. Feed once a month with a fertilizer designed for edibles.

My Asian pear and apple trees are overflowing with fruit this year as are all my citrus trees including lemon, lime, tangerine and tangelo. Grapes are ripening and will be harvested next month. Miniature or dwarf fruit trees are available at local nurseries allowing you to grow your favorite treats in troughs or containers. Berries can be grown in barrels to boost your antioxidant quotient to fight disease and keep you healthy.

There is nothing better than plucking a few leaves from your aromatic herbs, ripe fruit from your tree, tangy berries from the bush, or any veggie growing in your personal plots to add flavor and health to your cuisine. Growing in the ground or pots near your cooking environment will decrease stress and improve your happiness quotient. Your botanical babies are beautiful!

Plant your own garden of eating today. Enjoy paradise on a plate. Bon appetite!

Happy Gardening. Happy Growing.