

# Growing Vegetables in a Small Space

Contributed by Cab

Or how to get bang for buck in a small veg patch

For years I've been trying to get as much as I can out of my small garden. I've learned that you can, with a little luck and small effort, can keep yourself in greens for most of the year from even the smallest 'pocket handkerchief' garden.

During the last five years I've experimented with as many different vegetables, chosen for their flavour, ease of growth, how they would fit into the tiny space I had, and for their aesthetic qualities. What I present here is a simple summary of how to turn a tiny space into an attractive and productive vegetable plot.

What kind of space can be a vegetable garden?

Pretty much any space or patch of dirt can be used to grow SOMETHING, so it really comes down to what you want to do to turn your space into a vegetable garden. Try to think about your space in terms of the needs of a vegetable garden, those being light, soil and water.

Light is likely to be the one that you have least control over; if you're in a tight terrace with more houses behind your home, you might have a very shady patch that is difficult to cultivate. While there is little you can do to improve your lot, there are many vegetables that will grow surprisingly well even in a shady spot. Lettuce, sorrel, chard, mizuna and various other salad greens will thrive in even the shadiest garden.

Soil might immediately seem like something you can't do much about, but this is somewhere that the small gardener can really excel, you can do a better job on the soil in a small garden than you can in a large one. In your small vegetable garden, you've got less work to do, and consequently you can with very little effort maintain a higher level of fertility. By getting as much of your kitchen waste composted and back into the soil as possible, or by adding some good quality compost regularly, you will be able to get lots of great vegetables out of the ground each and every year.

Watering is another area in which you can do extremely well in a small space. By concentrating your efforts you can keep things well watered all season, even in a dry spell, a feat you could never hope to achieve with a larger plot. And in vegetable gardening, there are great gains to be made through effective watering.

Finally, the last component (but the one that makes the process worthwhile) is the plants. This is, after all, what it's all about. Which plants do you want in the small vegetable garden? Here are some simple rules for selecting.

(1) Choose things that you want to eat.

Yes, this sounds obvious, but you would be amazed by how many people fall into the trap of growing things that are easy rather than things they really want to eat. Radishes are the big one here, they're almost universal in vegetable gardens, to the point where you can hardly walk down any row of allotments without someone offering you some, but how often do you want to eat radishes? Pick those vegetables that you really, really want. Don't waste your precious space on lesser crops.

(2) Choose vegetables that are better grown than bought

Again, this might sound obvious, but don't grow your staple crops if you only have a small space. Onions, potatoes and suchlike are marvellous vegetables which produce an excellent yield, but they're also cheap as chips and don't benefit from being picked and eaten fresh from the ground as much as, say, lettuces, carrots and tomatoes.

(3) Choose vegetables that look good as well as taste good

If you've only got a small garden, it's worth making it look good while also making it productive. So when browsing for vegetable seeds, go for the ones that give you a great display of colour and texture. When planting out your veg patch, consider incorporating decorative flowers and herbs too, combining plants with different heights to create the best visual effects you can. But also, don't compromise on flavour just because something looks good; there are all manner of ornamental cabbages that you don't want to eat!

(4) Choose things that fit!

Courgettes might be your favourite vegetable, but the plants are rather massive, sprawling things quite unsuited to a small space. Or you may like purple sprouting broccoli, and look forward to its arrival every year, but are you willing to let it shade out the rest of the vegetable patch for most of the growing season? Generally speaking, smaller plants fit better into smaller spaces than larger plants, go for dwarf varieties and smaller vegetables, and you'll have a more varied and interesting harvest.

#### (5) Choose vegetables that have multiple uses

If you can't grow many vegetables, grow vegetables that you can use many different ways. Mizuna is a good example; it's an oriental green that is great in salad, and which can also be cooked in stir fries and noodle soup. You can use baby beetroot leaves in salads when they're young, like spinach when a bit older, and the roots can be pulled either small to eat raw or can be left in the ground till later to cook when older.

Armed with this advice, you're now well on your way to turning any small patch of ground into a productive vegetable patch. All that remains is to pick out some vegetables to plant. Here are a few suggestions.

#### Lettuce

The universal salad vegetable, and the one that is usually disappointing when you buy it. If you've never had a home grown lettuce before you're really missing out, and if you think that the choices are iceberg, loose or red lollo rosso then you're in for a huge surprise.

There are hundreds of varieties of lettuce seed you can buy, and they're all easy to grow. But in our small garden space, we want something that is compact, pretty and ideally capable of giving us a few leaves when we need them so we don't have to keep planting more.

'Freckles' is a good variety. It looks good, being freckled red on green leaves, it's a darling little thing to look at. It does fine in pots or straight in the soil, and it has a fine flavour. 'Webb's Wonderful' is one you'll see for sale, and its worth a bash. 'Little Fem' and 'Frisbee' are loose-ish heads and good, small lettuces with a sweet flavour.

Have a browse through some seed catalogues, see what takes your fancy. And if you can't pick out a few you want, then buy one of the mixed variety packets, they provide fine interest and excellent value.

#### Sorrel

If I grew only one thing in a small garden, it would be sorrel. It's a perennial, so you only have to plant it the once, and you can simply split the root up in winter and re-plant it. It has a sharp, almost lemony flavour, and it is useful in salads or cooked in a soup (sorrel soup being one of the best). And you really struggle to buy it anywhere, so grow your own and you'll immediately have something that is really rather special.

Not so many varieties of sorrel are available, the two standout ones being 'Large Leaved French', the most useful, and 'Blood Veined', a more ornamental sort with striking red veins.

#### Rocket

It never ceases to amaze me just how much you can get charged for rocket leaves, when its probably the easiest vegetable to grow. Scatter the seeds, mix them in with the soil, and soon enough you'll have rocket.

Again, there are more varieties than you might be aware of, but for my money the best is Turkish rocket; it has the most 'rocket' flavour of the lot, and it stays good and tasty even after it has gone to seed.

#### Beetroot and Chard

Beetroot might not seem like the most likely candidate for a small garden, but trust me, its an excellent plant to grow in a restricted space. Choose a smaller variety like 'Pronto', and sow it thickly; thin it out during the growing season, and you have a supply of tasty baby beetroot leaves right through summer.

Chard is almost the same as beetroot, and almost the same as spinach; it is grown for the leaves and fleshy leaf stems, giving you two veg for the space of one, and again, its good cooked or raw. Best of all, you can get red, yellow, pink and green varieties (or one, called 'Bright Lights' or rainbow chard that will give you plants of all sorts of colours).

#### Carrots

You won't be growing enormous great carrots in a small garden, they take months to grow and you don't want to be devoting all your space to big carrots for that long. But there are some superb carrot varieties that are smaller and as sweet as honey to eat.

Varieties like 'Paris Garden', 'Paris Market' and 'Parmex' are all tiny, round carrots that grow happily in shallow or stony soil (whereas larger ones need a better, finer soil so as not to end up forked). 'Amini' and 'Sugarsnax' are two mighty recommending early (meaning quick maturing) traditional shaped carrots. Or, if you want something really different, go for a purple or red variety ('Cosmic Purple', 'Purple Dragon' and 'Red Samurai' are all excellent).

#### Leeks

Again, don't think here about big pot leeks or even the normal shop bought leeks; go for one of the baby veg varieties. 'King Richard' is the best one I've tried. Sow the seed thickly, and harvest them when they're pencil thin. They seem to sit happily in the ground all year; I've got some outside now in the middle of April that I sowed this time last year, and they're still in excellent condition.

#### Tomatoes

Tomatoes can be enormous plants, but if you can manage to grow them against a sunny wall then you can produce the best, tastiest tomatoes you'll ever have, and you'll avoid shading out your other veg in the process.

I'll freely confess that I'm a sucker for tomatoes. I can't remember last time I grew less than four varieties, and every year I seem to have more. That's less of a problem now I have an allotment as well as my tiny garden, but it used to cause me all manner of problems.

Yet for all of the varieties I have tried, its good old 'Gardener's Delight' that is still my favourite. It'll give you large, sweet cherry tomatoes all summer, and from just a couple of plants you'll be sorted for salad till the frosts come. If you want something smaller that won't shade others out, go for a bush variety.

If the good old tomato doesn't seem exciting enough, try out tomatillos; they're just as easy to go, and they make the best salsas.

#### Beans

You won't be wanting great big bean wigwams, but that doesn't mean that you can't grow beans in a small garden. Again, go for dwarf varieties.

For runner beans, you can do little better than 'Hestia', a lovely little plant with red and white flowers and a good cropper too.

I have yet to encounter a variety of dwarf French bean that isn't good. My personal favourite is 'Valdor', a bright yellow variety.

And if you have no garden at all...

All is not lost! You can still grow more food than you would think, find out more here.

Got a question about your own backyard veg plot? Ask on the Downsizer.net Grow Your Own forum.