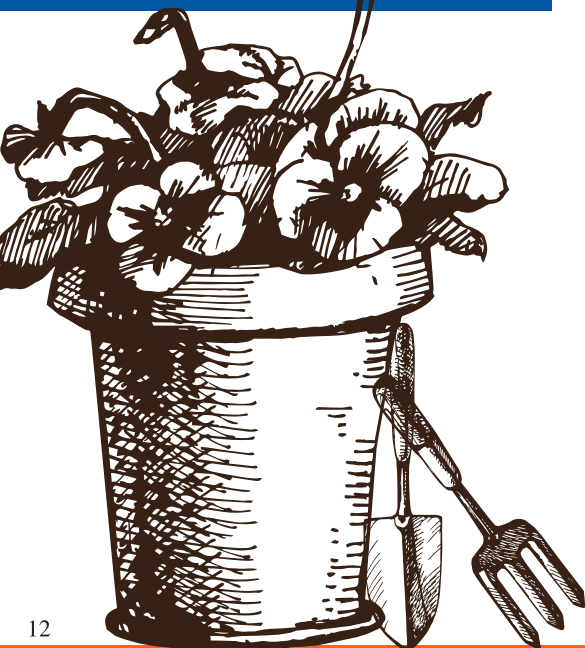
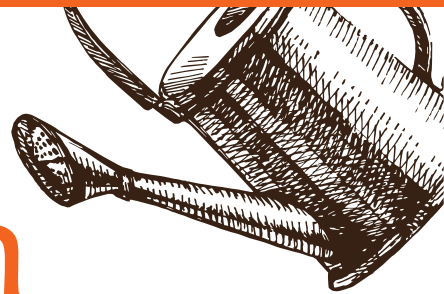


# Growing a Container Garden

Story and photos by Genevieve Northup



**A**s a child, I watched brides pose for portraits among my mom's award-winning roses and picked green beans from my dad's bountiful vegetable garden. My brother started planting trees at age four and now preserves forests for a living.

Unlike my family, I had no interest in gardening while living in downtown Austin, and later Dallas. But once I moved to rural Germany, I envied the tidy plots of blooming flowers and abundant produce. On multiple occasions, I bought hydrangeas and ferns only to have them die within weeks.

When we became close friends with German neighbors who always served something from their backyard — champagne cocktails with homemade elderflower blossom syrup, strawberry and apple jellies, root vegetable soup — I was inspired once again. I asked my mom to help me start a garden during her visit last summer and quickly discovered that I could grow a

garden. Now I want to pass on what I learned so that you can find your green thumb.

## Why a container garden?

We chose the balcony over the backyard because of slugs, pesky moles and our exuberant Labrador who is frequently scolded for digging. There are other benefits of a container garden I found appealing: little weeding is necessary (ugh, weeding), and the plants can be shifted if they are not thriving in their current location (meaning I was less likely to kill them).

## What you need

Many plants can live happily in terrace boxes, including squash, cherry tomatoes, eggplant, lettuce, spinach, peppers and herbs. Research online for varieties that can handle the amount of sunshine or shade of

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*But the lessons I learned went far beyond how to grow a garden ...*



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your proposed garden space before shopping, and translate the names to German.

You can purchase seeds to start from scratch or plants well on their way to producing yumminess; I highly recommend the latter if you are a beginner. Look for short, full plants that have healthy, green leaves; signs of new growth; and at least one strong, undamaged primary stem. Hold on to care instruction tags.

Now that you have a cartful of plants, you need soil and fertilizer. Look for all-purpose potting mix; if you're not



*My first zucchini and many buds*

sure, ask someone. Here's a handy chart for determining how many bags to buy: <https://bonnieplants.com/library/how-many-pots-can-you-fill-with-a-bag-of-soil>.

There are a number of organic and synthetic fertilizers available. I bought one container of Chrysal universal garden formula, which did the job.

Select pots that are functional. Look for those with holes in the base so that water drains; otherwise, plant roots may rot. Also consider size and shape, such as wider,



*Mom and I celebrated our success*

shallower pots for lettuce and wide, deep pots for squash. [Gardeners.com](https://www.gardeners.com) offers these depth guidelines:

- 4-5 inches: chives, lettuce, basil, cilantro
- 6-7 inches: bush beans, garlic, kohlrabi, onions, peas, mint, thyme
- 8-9 inches: green beans, carrots, cucumber, eggplant, peppers, spinach, parsley, rosemary
- 10-12 inches: beets, broccoli, okra, squash, dill

You can make cute, functional planters out of vintage finds, like wooden wine crates, barrels and metal tubs; Pinterest has lots of inspiration. Wooden crates probably provide adequate drainage, but you'll need to drill holes in other containers.

### How to transplant

Get your pots in position and fill with a layer of soil. Mix in fertilizer according to label directions. Remove plants from temporary pots, making sure you do not damage the root system. Loosen constricted roots by softly squeezing. Add the plant to the appropriate pot and surround with soil up to an inch below the rim. Ensure the roots are fully covered, and water until the soil is damp.

### Continual care

Now for the hardest part — keeping everything alive. Plants won't bark or cry if you've forgotten to feed them, so set a reminder on your phone and involve the family in garden maintenance:

**Check the soil level periodically** to make sure it remains one to two inches below the container rim. Have extra soil on hand to replenish as needed.

**Supplement the soil with a water-soluble fertilizer** every two weeks. I'll be honest; I didn't do this and still ended up

with a healthy bounty.

Stick your index finger about half an inch into the soil to **determine if the plants need water**. If the soil is damp, it is not time to water. I did this every couple of days when the weather was mild, but during the 2015 heat wave, I checked and watered every evening.

**Watch for wilting, pests, disease, weeds and overcrowding.** On sweltering summer days, I shifted the lettuce and squash from our unsheltered balcony to the shade. I also hung netting around the cherry tomatoes to keep birds away.

**Understand and accept that many plants are seasonal.** By mid-fall, my garden had stopped producing. I still had some herbs, but I emptied the other pots to start again after the *Eisheilige* in mid-May, when it is unlikely to drop below freezing overnight.

### The fruits of labor

My total investment was under \$100, and I soon had cherry tomatoes, zucchini, peppermint, cilantro, basil, rosemary, thyme and so much lettuce that we gave bagfuls away because we couldn't eat it fast enough. I still remember the first meal I made from my garden — beautiful, crisp greens topped with cherry tomatoes, candied walnuts, crumbled goat cheese and raspberry vinaigrette. I don't think I'd ever been as proud of a meal as I was that night.

But the lessons I learned went far beyond how to grow a garden. I began to have more faith in myself. If I could grow a garden, maybe I could do other things that I'd been afraid to try. And that has made the return on my investment worth more than a green thumb. ■

