



urban/small-space gardening



what is it?

Most of us have limited space to grow things, but this isn't necessarily the disadvantage to increasing self-reliance that it might seem. All gardening is about the accumulation of resources into a relatively fertile, intensively-managed area. We're used to the idea that our food comes from industrially-farmed prairies, but those landscapes are neither as productive by area nor as ecologically diverse as small intensive gardens.

The small garden starts perhaps as the sun-trap on the forest edge where fruit and herbs proliferate; it becomes the hard-won clearing or the raised beds where accumulated organic matter makes black soil; from early times containers were used, setting plants above the cold ground and within reach of the back door. This tradition has never disappeared and now there is a renaissance in intensive, opportunistic, and defiant gardening in the nooks and the crannies of our towns and cities.

If you have a windowsill then you can garden; you can turn a few pence worth of seeds into a regular supply of salad or of normally expensive herbs. If you have a sunny wall to fix containers to, you have your own walled garden; a balcony and sunshine - a micro-field, a place to model not on the harsh and arid lines of the city, but on nature, on the forest. An accessible is a space waiting to be gardened. With people who have conservatories and even small gardens, we are into the realm of the privileged. It's a waste to see these places put down to gravel or concrete; when we do this we are modelling deserts, and the Earth doesn't need more of those.

Small and urban gardens present their own challenges, but often they enjoy distinct advantages over other places to grow food. Small spaces can be managed to create excellent micro-climates for gardening: they can be sheltered and enjoy the benefits of being in urban heat islands; roofs present opportunities for



Herbs in pots just outside the back door, close to the kitchen.

rainwater harvesting, and structures can be adapted to support trellises or mini-greenhouses.

Townscapes also present myriad opportunities for scrounging the materials to make our gardens: pallets become planters; all sorts of containers can be pressed into service, and if you're lucky enough to live near stables or an urban farm, manure won't be a problem. Grass cuttings and the same wood chippings that cost money in the countryside can be had for free in towns and cities; soon your garden will be performing valuable ecological services: recycling and composting, as well as growing food.

If you have some ground then most likely, even if it's buried under the skin of the city, there is soil. That's a great start. But if you're starting with containers, you'll have little choice but to do what gardeners have always done, to make the black stuff yourself.

what are the benefits?

It's hard to imagine one change that could more dramatically transform our built environment than a massive adoption of urban food gardening. The only thing stopping us realising William Morris' vision of cities full of vegetable gardens and fruit trees is our lack of community and imagination.

Gardening brings enormous health benefits - exercise and good food in return for it. Home gardening is also good for the purse and the smaller your gardening project the more you should concentrate on the high value or rare crops you like. A balcony garden is not the place to grow a few kilos of potatoes that could be bought for a couple of quid, but if you grow salads, basil, parsley, strawberries or even lemons from a tree in a pot, your balcony garden could be worth a lot of money over a year.



You can get a lot of food from an urban garden.



Garden for happiness, for your living environment, for good food and to save money. Urban, small-space gardening is no different to any garden in these ways. Beyond that, by growing your own food you're reducing food miles and your ecological footprint; it would do every person on Earth good to grow some of their own food, and to look after some living soil.

what can I do?

Small-space gardening can be a great place to start gardening. Your one nasturtium seed in an old yoghurt pot can be what starts you working on much more ambitious projects.

Define the space for your project. This could be a small garden area, a balcony or a window box. You may be lucky enough to have soil, otherwise you'll need to work out what your growing medium will be. In some places green waste compost is available cheaply from the council, or you might start with a trip to pick up some well-rotted horse manure, or something more exotic if your local urban farm has an alpaca or two.

Raised beds might be the best way to go if you have the space - the 'lasagna bed' starts with cardboard, compost, manure and grass cuttings; this carefully-layered approach will give you a sort of compost heap garden that will mature into a highly-productive patch. Don't tread on it though. If you can't have beds then you'll need containers. This will certainly be the case if you're a balcony gardener or a windowsill farmer. Containers can be scrounged from all sorts of previous uses: do you have space for a shipping pallet or two? They can be turned into excellent herb and salad beds. Buckets, barrels, old bottles and pots can all be turned into growing spaces. You'll need some tools, although light hand tools will suffice and if you get them from a carboot sale, or from a supermarket seasonal aisle, they'll cost very little.

One of the challenges of container gardening is making sure that your plants don't dry out. You'll need to work out where the water for your garden is coming from. Whilst tap water can do, it's better to harvest rainwater: you'll need a rain butt and a watering can; you might use guttering, pipe and a hose. There are all sorts of clever ways to water, but pretty much every technique can be put into place with scavenged materials and a little craft.

With planning and regular attention it's easy to get good results from your small garden. Be sure to



Really productive urban raised beds.

start on a scale you can manage. Be as realistic about your time and commitment as you have been about your space and other resources. Once you begin you'll see all kinds of potential in your system to add productivity and diversity, to increase or improve your yield, but if you start without a plan and take on too much you risk storing up problems and joining the ranks of people who believe gardening is too difficult for them, just because they set off on the wrong foot. Any garden will present its own challenges, problems and opportunities. You may find that your space doesn't enjoy sunlight all day long, or it may be so hot and sunny that you struggle to keep your plants well watered. Finding solutions, choosing crops that prosper and adapting your ideas to fit, are all central to gardening no matter whether you have 2 square metres or 10 acres.

resources

- lowimpact.org/urban-small-space-gardening - more info, courses, links, products and books, including:
- Anger, Fiebrig & Schnyder, *Edible Cities*
- Michael Guerra, *the Edible Container Garden*
- Timothy Tripp, *Raised Bed Gardening*
- Mel Bartholomew, *Square Foot Gardening*
- Gaia Rodale, *Organic Vertical Gardening*
- balconycontainergardening.com - all about growing on balconies
- squarefootgardening.org - Square Foot Gardening Foundation
- vertical-gardener.com - no yard? no problem

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