



Small-scale GARDENING

Grow your own in any space

By Amanda N. Wegner

Carla Alvarado has been gardening for a long time. She started tending vegetables with her grandfather as a young girl, and then continued in the community gardens in Shorewood. But when she and her husband downsized and moved into a condominium, she no longer had vast plots of soil to work over each season.

What she did have, though, was a sun-filled deck (nine stories above Lake Mendota, no less), a green thumb and the desire to give container vegetable gardening a try.

“I really had no idea how to container

garden,” says Alvarado, now in her second season. “But I figured that I’d been growing my own food long enough that with enough sun and a little research, I could continue to grow my own food in this smaller space.”

Ingredients for success

Karen Johannsen, Johannsen’s Greenhouses, offers these four ingredients for vegetable container gardening success:

- **Sun.** “It’s the No. 1 rule: You have to have full, all-day sun for most vegetables. If your spot gets half a day of sun,

you can get by with leaf crops, like lettuce and spinach.”

- **Water.** Be prepared to do frequent watering, especially with containers in full sun. “Vegetables are quite thirsty,” says Johannsen, “so water when dry.”
- **Soil.** Good quality potting soil can make a big difference in the way that your plant grows. Try a soilless mix, which stays looser for better aeration. Many also have water-holding polymers.
- **Fertilize.** Plants in containers have limited growing space, and they can’t

Carla Alvarado’s deck is home to a container garden of vegetables.

Photos by Amy Lynn Schreck

draw nutrients from the ground as they're bound by the container they are in. Johannsen says whether you choose organic or conventional fertilizer, follow product instructions as each type has different application methods and periods.

Reaping the perks

Alvarado's deck garden includes three raised beds with built-in water reservoirs and a variety of pots filled with herbs. Given the amount of gardening real estate available on her porch, she's limited herself to "everyday vegetables," such as tomatoes, peppers and the like.

"With container gardening, you have to downscale," says Alvarado, a research scientist emerita in infection control and patient safety at UW-Madison. "There's an economy of scale. Broccoli is a big beautiful plant, but you have to compare what you get to the space it takes up in a container garden."

While you may not have space for every vegetable you want, container gardening offers a number of perks aside from having a bevy of backyard bounty.

For starters, "a regular garden will overproduce. You always end up with more than you need." Last year, Alvarado's garden produced about 30 pounds of produce, a good amount for her and her husband.

Another perk? Whether you're using raised beds or big pots, there's no squatting or kneeling to weed or harvest.

Want a few more? "I can be in my PJs and have coffee while I'm weeding. And, since everything's in miniature, I don't have to deal with all sorts of garden tools," says Alvarado.

Anything your palate desires

The amazing thing about vegetables is that there isn't just one kind of bean or one kind of tomato; the array of varieties, including many that have either been bred or have naturally evolved over time to fit perfectly in small

spaces, means you can grow just about anything in a container. Tomatoes and peppers fare particularly well (just make sure the container is large enough!), as do leaf crops and herbs, but if you really want zucchini or cucumbers, they aren't off-limits. Besides, the popularity of container gardening is on the rise, so there are plenty of resources available to get your container garden to grow.

"Container gardening is definitely on the rise," says Johannsen. "With the food movement, it's been rising the last couple seasons and it continues to grow. You have to try it. Just start with one tomato in a pot and watch it grow!"



You can reach Madison writer and gardener Amanda Wegner at www.amandawegner.com.



Progressive care.

More comforts than home.

Call today to set up your visit—tour our beautiful skilled care facility and ask the friendly staff about our:

- ♥ Care plans directed by you
- ♥ Private rooms arranged in unique "neighborhood" style
- ♥ Full-time chaplain
- ♥ On-site pharmacy
- ♥ Affiliation with St. Mary's Hospital
- ♥ Award-winning care

St. Mary's CARE CENTER

3401 Maple Grove Drive
Madison, WI

(608) 845-1000

www.stmaryscarecenter.net

A member of SSM Health Care

All faiths welcome.



2008 GOVERNOR'S
AWARD OF EXCELLENCE
RECIPIENT
WISCONSIN HOSPITAL AWARD
FOR PERFORMANCE EXCELLENCE