

3 Steps to Bountiful Container Growing

Urban Turnip with Dan Mowinski



All over the world, people with small gardens (or no garden at all) are taking up container gardening. The feeling that comes from tending to your own little corner of greenery, especially while the city simmers along in the background, is incomparable.

Container gardening also presents a wonderful opportunity to grow hard-to-find and unusual vegetables, to recycle household waste, and to benefit from the innumerable mental health benefits of connecting with nature, often particularly welcome to concrete-dazed urbanites!

Wherever you are, whether you live in the city or are just eager to try container growing, in this guide I'll offer some key tips for effective growing. Plants are surprisingly forgiving little fellows and, as long as you take care of the fundamentals, will reward you for many years to come...well, the perennials will, at least.

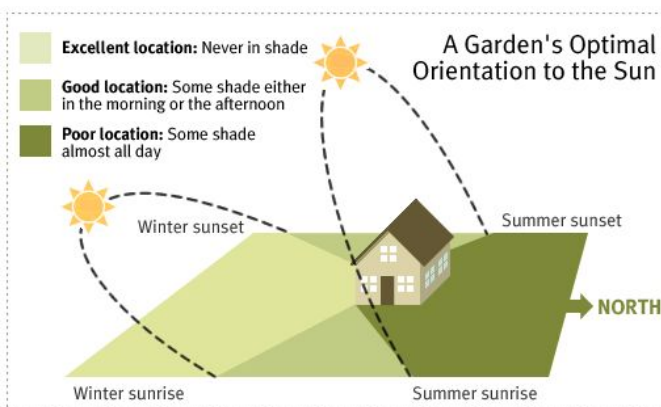
Let's dig in...

Step 1: Evaluate Your Space

(Mistake to avoid: Planting sun-loving plants in shade.)



The first step is to evaluate how much **direct sunlight** your plot, patio or balcony gets. To understand what direct sunlight is, imagine that you are a plant. If you can see the sun from where you are (or if you could if there weren't any clouds in the way) that's direct sunlight. If you move to a place that's still bright but where you can't see the sun directly, that's **indirect light**.



In the northern hemisphere, **south-facing** plots (and windows) get most of the sun through the day, whilst those that are **north-facing** tend to have limited exposure.

A compass and a little spare time to track the sun's journey across the sky are all you need to determine your plot's potential. Keep the following pointers in mind...

3 to 5 hours - Focus on plants that can tolerate lower levels of light like **lettuces, kale, swiss chard and chives**. For those places that tend towards the higher end of the spectrum (5 as opposed to 3), **radishes, carrots and peas** can also be included.

6 hours or more - If you have a sunny spot then the world's your horticultural oyster! In the summer months you can grow the likes of **tomatoes, chillies, strawberries, courgettes, herbs like rosemary, bay and thyme, and a host of others**.

Unobstructed south-facing windows can be used to grow plants that like lots of heat along with copious amounts of light, like cucumbers.

Step 2: Craft Your Potting Mix ...the Missing Ingredient!

(Mistake to avoid: Not regularly fertilizing with macro AND micro nutrients.)



Far too little attention is given to potting media. I think this is a great shame. It's easily the most important part (in my opinion) of growing crops in pots. Get it wrong and you're laying the foundations for less-than-optimum harvests, pests and (potentially) dead plants.

The key thing to keep in mind is that any **potting mix**, a term which I use to mean any container medium (soil included) in which plants can grow, needs to provide a plant with three essential things...

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- **Water:** Water is held in what are called “micropores”, tiny little spaces in the potting mix. Water is obviously essential for plant health and is also the medium through which nutrients are absorbed.
 - **Drainage:** This is the area where most potting mixes fall short. Most commercial mixes are made using peat, which has lots of micropores but few macropores. Plant roots also need air and can “suffocate” when not given adequate drainage.
 - **Nutrients:** Again, another common failing of most potting mixes is that they don’t have sufficient nutrients. Commercial *compost* is usually a mixture of peat and compost (decayed organic matter), with the latter ingredient providing nutrients.

You can always use multi-purpose compost or a potting mix bought from a store. My recommendation is to add extra drainage material (grit, perlite or composted bark) and a few handfuls of slow-release fertilizer *if* it hasn’t already been added (most of the time it won’t be). The nutrients in potting mixes are usually exhausted after about six weeks.

Alternatively, you can make your own simple blend made up of the following:

- **1 part compost or manure** - Your compost will provide nutrients and minerals.
- **1 part coir** - Coir will hold water.
- **1 part perlite or composted bark** - Your composted bark will increase drainage.
- **Slow-release fertilizer** - My recommendation is to include a slow release 6-month fertilizer, which is usually available in granular form.

Always remember to feed *if* you’re not adding any fertilizer or using a store-bought compost. Nutrients are limited in pots and your plants can’t stretch their roots out into that deep, earthy, mineral-filled goodness. So water with feed at least once a week in the growing phase.

Step 3: Pick Your Plants

(Mistake to avoid: Not growing dwarf or baby varieties.)



There's an art to picking plants for small spaces. Some plants that would be perfectly at home on the allotment (asparagus, for instance) don't lend themselves to container growing. Others, like potatoes and brussels sprout aren't ideal because they take up a lot of space and are cheap to buy.

Some great choices include:

- **Lettuces:** Edible leaves are an obvious choice for container gardeners. They're fast-growing, low-maintenance and there's an array of unusual, colourful and **tasty** plant varieties that you can't find in the supermarkets. Whether it's the variegated patterns of *Marvel of Four Seasons*, the simmering red of *Lollo Rosso* or the speedy buttery leaves of *Tom Thumb*, you'll be certain to find a cluster of varieties that suits you.

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- **Root vegetables:** Veggies like beetroots, turnips and carrots are amongst my favourite to grow in pots. They're unfussy and don't require deep soil for rooting (though deeper pots are always better). Leaves are also edible (yep, carrot leaves taste great) and great for using in soups.
 - **Fruit bushes:** Certain plants like blueberry bushes can actually fare better in pots due to their need for what's called *ericaceous* soil, which is acidic. They're easy to maintain but do need proper maintenance and feeding through spring and summer.
 - **Tomatoes, cucumbers and courgettes:** Save these for the hot, bright indoor spots. They'll be fine in pots.

With the exception of plants that are naturally small (like many lettuces), go for baby or dwarf varieties. These are compact and will fare much better in pots.

A Few Words About Urban Turnip...

Urban Turnip is a simple grow-your-own resource that brings time-tested wisdom, alongside a modern understanding of plants, to the city setting.

The focus is on growing in containers, though there's also resources dedicated to small space, hydroponic and indoor gardening too. It's mostly inspired by my own growing successes (and many failures) in London.



My old rhubarb patch in need of weeding!

Whether you've got a few harvests under your belt already or are just toying with the idea of starting a windowsill herb garden, I sincerely hope you will find something of value here.

Please get in touch and let me know what you think of the site if you get a chance. I'm always open to suggestions and feedback. Contact me at dan@urbanturnip.org.

References

Diagram of sun exposure: [LINK](#).

Images: [LINK](#).