

Grow Your Own

You don't need acres to grown your own food

Obviously, not everyone has a paddock for a back yard; and those with a neat suburban home set in a landscaped garden wouldn't fancy digging up the roses to plant vegies, never mind keeping the odd goat and having a few chickens running around. Apart from anything else, it would upset the neighbours and there's bound to be a local bi-law or two being broken. If you rent a property, turning over the lawn to grow potatoes is an unlikely option. Others living in apartments are even more limited. Despite the restrictions, however, everyone can still enjoy some home-grown produce. If a container of bean shoots on the kitchen bench is as good as it gets, that's got to be cheaper and more convenient than buying them from the supermarket. A window sill may be big enough to take a window box; an outside balcony is space just waiting for a planter or two. What about the roof – maybe there's a spot between the pigeon coops that could be borrowed? Anywhere you can grow a plant can provide something of your own that you don't have to buy. Aside from tasting better and being a darn sight healthier, there's self-satisfaction and many other benefits that you might not realise until you try.

Let's start from this last situation, the rented home. That's us. We have no window sills and the "garden" is concrete, but the landlords don't mind us having a few pots, so we grow some of our own herbs including a rosemary bush in a tub. Except for the rosemary which we grew from a cutting, we had to pay for the seedlings, plus potting mix and fertiliser, but it still works out a lot cheaper than buying parsley and chives in plastic bags from the shop. Not only that, but ours taste better and we can pick them fresh whenever we need them. Very little ground space is taken up, and the greenery along the back wall looks attractive. Next spring we'll be trying capsicum in a pot. Even pumpkin isn't out of the question, although our next-door neighbours grow them already, plus tomatoes and silver beet, so we have a convenient supply from their surplus. They have quite a large garden, but others who haven't don't need to miss out. A small, above-ground bed constructed from railway sleepers or cement blocks is quite easy to manage and will support a variety of plants, all growing happily together.

As anyone knows who has a garden and has tried growing a few vegies, it can be time-consuming, not to mention frustrating. Large areas may look good when first planted, but without regular attention, some plants take over while others struggle. Then the weeds start popping up and before long, an hour or two a week isn't enough to tend what has become a jungle. The thing is, big is not always best. We were introduced to an idea years ago, and it worked well for us. At the time, we had a block that was larger than most, but wanted to keep the home-grown vegetable side simple. So, we adopted the square-foot garden method. The idea is to limit the overall size of the bed, making it easier to manage. Every part of the growing area can be reached comfortably without having to stand on the soil. Four foot square is a good size; five foot is okay if you have long arms. Not much of a home farm, you might think, but if you have the space, you can set up more than one, or extend the square to a rectangle - provided you can stretch into the middle from the long sides. We set up three separated by cement paving slabs which restricted weeds to the beds and kept the mud off our shoes.

Taking the method a step further, companion planting is a great space-saver. Most plants are quite happy sitting next to others of a different type. There are exceptions, however: parsley seems to hate mint, and vice versa; so it pays to do a bit of research first. Also, basic common needs are a consideration, such as the amount and regularity of watering and fertilising – some like a lot, some don't. It's simple really, with a little commonsense. As for what can be grown, climate is always a deciding factor. Having said that, there are still ways to simulate artificial conditions by using shade-cloth to reduce heat in summer, or creating a mini-greenhouse with clear plastic sheeting stretched over a suitable frame. Both of these covers can extend over the

entire bed, or be restricted to a small section. That way, the tomatoes can be in full sun at one end, while the lettuces at the other are shielded by their own private canopy.

Herbs are herbs and will grow almost anywhere. Before buying from a nursery or similar, pinch a leaf from a seedling, then roll it between finger and thumb for a sniff. This gives some idea of the flavour when fully grown. Oregano is one herb that varies considerably; and it looks just like its cousin Marjoram which isn't as pungent. A herb that fails your test is a waste of time growing.

For those living in a warm climate, sweet corn (corn on the cob) is a good one to try. Once the cane grows up a bit, peas and runner beans can be planted around the base. They won't need stakes or trellis to climb - they'll use the corn which takes far longer to reach maturity. Tomatoes flourish in this restricted environment and are easy to control as long as they are staked and tended regularly. Keep them tied to stakes and cut or pinch out the lower laterals (they are the little shoots that spring from the main stem just above the leaves) early in their growth. These produce fruit, but will crawl everywhere making it hard to control weeds and pests. Once the plants reach the desired height, pinch off the growing tip – that's the one right at the top - to encourage the lower fruit-bearing stems to flourish. A few plants of Summer Basil interspersed in the bed will attract the bees and the aromatic leaves go great with fresh tomato. Capsicums and chillies will like it alongside the toms; and they all require pretty much the same as far as water and fertiliser.

Most edible plants will grow under the climatic conditions to which they are best suited; and time of year dictates when to plant for good results. Depending on shop prices and availability, you may find some not worth the bother. Carrots, for instance, take a long time to mature and need a deep, fine soil. Onions don't like a lot of nitrogen, so they grow well in soil previously used for another crop that has finished, happy to take up the residual nutrients in the soil; but they also take a while to reach a decent size. Squash, zucchini and cucumbers can be grown up small frames or trellis to save on ground space. This also allows better air-passage through the leaves reducing the chance of mildew. Pumpkins and melons suffer from the same problem, but they'll need to stay on the ground; and, like the freight-hopper, they will travel far and wide, so they'll very quickly take over their own bed and any others within snaking distance. One thing to bear in mind with these - only the roots need soil, water and fertilizer; the fruit will grow and swell quite readily on lawn or even concrete and pavers. Strawberries in season can be amazing, huge with a decent soil. Beetroot, turnips, lettuce, celery, you name it. The bonuses are that you can pick your crop fresh, and you know what went into growing it.

As long as you don't plant more than you are likely to need, by following a few simple rules, you can keep yourself in fresh produce for most of the year. Be guided by the growing times of individual types and put in just enough in one planting, then another lot a week or two later. If that's too fiddly, plant all the seedlings you have, and once they're ready, swap your surplus with friends and neighbours. You can even save your own seed for next season from selected crops (always pick the best); and tending them after germination is very satisfying; but, like any kids, they need everything doing for them and won't survive on neglect. We prefer to buy our seedlings from the nursery in punnets; but that's our choice. Yours is yours, and I think you'll agree, it's really nice to have one for a change.

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