



SOUTH CAROLINA FAMILY AND COMMUNITY LEADERS

Affiliated with National Volunteer Outreach Network, Country Women's Council, U.S.A.,
Associated Country Women of the World and in partnership with Clemson University Cooperative
Extension Service

SCFCL WEBSITE: <http://clemson.edu/fyd/fcl.htm>

Leader Training Guide

Guidelines for Successful Container Vegetable Gardening

Objective: To use your creativity while following the Guidelines to successful container vegetable gardening.

Lesson Overview/Introduction:

A small vegetable garden can be more than a source of healthy foods. It can also be a work of art, or at least a work of personal creativity. Plant your tomatoes, peppers and bush beans in a kiddie swimming pool. Or stack old tires and grow clumps of okra. One garden this year is a library of vegetables, grown in bookshelves pushed over flat on the ground, then filled with soil, compost and topped with hay. The bookshelves were bought at yard sales and "junque" auctions, cost less than the lumber to build them and took no time to assemble. Let your imagination run loose and you will be seeing containers everywhere -- an old wheelbarrow, canvas tote bags, an old rocking chair with a bushel basket of soil in the seat and vines growing up the back like a trellis. Just up the road from Clemson is a motel where the owners filled in the swimming pool!

It's all container gardening. And the same guidelines that apply for Right-Brain orderly gardening work for Left-Brain creative gardening. Follow these guidelines and growing good food is nearly goof-proof.

Lesson:

No.1 Figure out what you want to grow. Be honest with yourself and grow the vegetables you want to eat. It's a lot easier to take care of a garden that contains food you like. If this is your first garden, grow only a couple of items, maybe tomatoes and peppers. Once you have had a homegrown tomato sandwich (use Bunny Bread, even if nutritionists disapprove), you will be hooked.

Go through your list and sort the vegetables by how deep the plants need to be in the ground. Patio tomatoes do fine in 12-inch deep containers; salad greens and many herbs grow very well in shallower items, needing not much more than six inches of soil.

Look for plants that are small, compact varieties. Read the labels, looking for dwarf or bush varieties and plants that do well in containers or on patios. You can use larger varieties, but be prepared to keep them cut back.

No. 2 Choose your containers. Not everything works as a pot. Shallow pans hold too little soil and dry out quickly. Deep containers, such as old water troughs for livestock are too deep, taking a lot of soil to fill. A rule of thumb is that anything that looks like it would hold

12 deep by 10 inches across will work. You can go as shallow as eight inches and as deep as 24 inches, as narrow as a coffee cup and wider than an old footlocker. Remember deeper and wider are heavier. Moving big containers around is tough work.

As for materials, this is where you can get creative. The only things to avoid are old chemical containers -- no plastic buckets used for pool chemicals or metal paint cans -- when doubt, throw it out. There's plenty to choose from. Keep in mind the weight of the container and its stability so it won't tip over. If you find light-weight containers you like, you can always put sand or rocks in the bottoms to make them more secure. Many an herb garden has been grown in old soup cans and a pepper can do quite well in an old cowboy boot.

Now do a reality check. Are you doing more than you can deal with? All those plants are going to need watering and tending. Remember, also, that you must put your plants in a place that will get at least six hours of full sun. So, if you only have a small patch of sunny space, don't collect a yard-full of pots. Oh, and one more thing: try to site your garden where you can water it easily.

Let's talk holes for a second. Put holes in the bottom of containers for drainage. Lots of plants don't like wet feet, er, roots. To keep the hole from plugging, most folks use small rocks, but think green! Use plastic screw tops off soda bottles or wine corks -- some households have lots of wine corks.

No. 3 Get soil to fill the containers. Use potting soil. Don't dig up dirt from your yard. It's too dense and probably is laden with grass and weed seeds that will grow in the container. You can buy potting soil. The store-bought kind will contain nutrients and be clean of weed seed. It will also likely have materials that will help retain moisture in the soil.

Potting soil is only good for one season. Some experts say you can add soil nutrient replenisher but not everyone has had success re-invigorating potting soil and you run the risk of disease build up. A compromise might be to dump your old potting soil on the ground and mix it with new potting soil, then reload your containers and mix the leftover soil with compost. You do have a compost pile, don't you? Maybe you and a neighbor can start a compost co-op.

No. 4 It's planting time. There are two ways to plant: seeds and transplants. Some folks do a bit of both. Every year as soon as it gets warm, it's hard to resist filling a couple of cut-down cardboard boxes with tomatoes, peppers and herbs. It's instant gratification to see them up and growing.

But, for later in the season, start seeds in peat cups. There is something nearly spiritual about planting a seed, having it push through the soil and take hold. Planting seeds also provides the opportunity to grow varieties that are not carried at the stores. You can order real Italian basil from an international seed supplier or get heirloom tomato seeds from varieties native to the Andes where tomatoes originated.

Follow the directions on the seedling pot or seed package for planting. If you do this, your vegetables will almost always grow. Be mindful of spacing -- more is not better with seed. A crowded container causes runty plants. After you get the plants in the soil, water them with a

small watering can. If you use a hose, attach a shower head; avoid the standard nozzle because it's too much water at once. A steady shower is better than a downpour.

Keep the soil moist. Keep the soil moist. Keep the soil moist. Got that? *Moist but not wet. Use your finger and feel the soil before you water.* Containers dry out far faster than ground soil. Missing a day or two of water can wither young plants. If a plant does not look healthy, yank it and plant a new one. Don't invest your time and effort in puny plants. They are not children or pets.

No. 5 Pick a sunny spot. Nearly every vegetable needs at least 6 hours of sunshine a day. Some can tolerate more sun and heat. Others cannot take too much. A beach umbrella can protect those plants that need a bit of time out of the heat and rays. The good thing about an umbrella is you can move it, but remember to take it down if it's going to storm. Another option is to put your plant containers on wheels and move them. Some gardeners use a dolly or hand truck to wheel pots and containers around.

No. 6 Your potting mix may contain a slow-release fertilizer; if it doesn't, add a slow-release, granular fertilizer when you plant. Since containers require more watering, some nutrients will be leached out more quickly. You will probably need to add more nitrogen and potassium as the growing season progresses. Look for a soluble fertilizer with a ratio like 16-4-8; the middle number represents phosphorus which doesn't dissolve in water and move out like the other two major nutrients. Some gardeners like to use a weak solution and fertilize weekly

Water is the mother's milk of plants. You can overwater, but container gardens need a lot of water. Smaller containers dry out more quickly than large ones; they may need watering more than once a day. Check your containers daily, unless it is pouring down rain. That daily touch and feel session means your plants won't dry out and you will be quick to notice any pests or diseases.

Regarding diseases and pests, your first line of defense is planting varieties that have resistance to certain common problems. When you water, don't get the leaves of plants wet but apply water right to the soil surface. Space your plants so that sun and air can reach all parts of them to avoid diseases and promote the healthiest growth. Hand pick stink bugs if they get on your tomatoes. Those troublesome aphids can be controlled with Insecticidal soap, but it won't work on all pests. Start over each year with fresh potting soil. For help with any pest or disease problems, contact experts at Clemson's HGIC 1-888-656-9988.

No. 7 Pick your vegetables. This sounds silly, but you would be amazed by how many people grow vegetables, then leave them on the plants. If you can't eat all your vegetables, give them away. Many food banks and community pantries welcome fresh food donations.

Picking your vegetables keeps them growing. If you have more produce than you eat, learn to preserve, can, pickle or freeze foods. Contact the Clemson Cooperative Extension Service to find out when classes are taught. The Clemson HGIC has many pamphlets available by phone or via the Internet on preserving foods.

No. 8 Weed immediately. Weeds compete with your vegetable plants, mooching moisture and nutrients. Pluck out the free-loaders as soon as you see them. A sterile potting soil will come weed-free and only a few seeds might float in over the season. Applying a light mulch will help conserve soil moisture and keep those weeds at bay. If you have large containers, such as kiddie pools or unattached pick-up truck bed, regular gardening tools are needed. For smaller containers, hand tools work great. It's always a pleasure to go to a new hardware store and find a the tool of your dreams – at least for few days until you go back to the old tried and true trowel and cultivator you always use.

No. 9 Set up a schedule to mind your garden. Some people can't wait to get into the garden, but for many of us gardening is a means to an end – food. If you're not an exuberant gardener, you'll have to make it a routine, like exercising or cleaning the house. Evenings after supper is a great time to go out and putter. You're not supposed to water in the evening, but for some of us, especially those who prefer to water with a can, dusk is the only time available. Just avoid wetting that foliage; plants like to go to sleep with their leaves dry.

No. 10 Share what you know and what you grow. Once you learn how to keep up a garden – what makes for a good pot and what does not – pass it on. There are few satisfactions as pleasurable as growing a good tomato or watermelon. Teaching someone else how to do it is nearly as satisfying. It does come with responsibility: get used to calls or e-mails seeking answers and advice.

Kids, especially, can get involved in the pot-searching phase and even the planting time, but it's the rare child who loves to weed and water. Share what you grow. If you know of any elderly people in your area who don't have many visitors or get out much, take them vegetables already cleaned and ready to eat. If you feel the urge to cook or can for them, check first about their health and diet needs. For some, salt and sugar are off the menu and it would be a shame to make something that could cause problems.

No. 11 At the end of the season, empty your containers, wash them, and put them away until you are ready to plant again. Each year, look for new containers and new vegetable varieties. Get on a couple of seed catalog mailing lists and dream about tomatoes, cucumbers, strawberries and watermelons. And vow to learn to preserve and can if you don't know how.

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Sources & References:

- 1) Container Gardening Guide (www.containergardeningtips.com)
- (2) [Container Vegetable Gardening - Growing Vegetables in Pots](#)
- (3) [Square Foot Gardening Foundation](#)
- (4) [No ground? Use containers: Journey to Forever organic garden](#)
- (5) Container Vegetable Gardening by Bob Polomski and Debbie Shaughnessy, Clemson University, <http://hgic.clemson.edu/factsheets/hgic1251.htm>
- (6) "The Edible Container Garden: Growing Fresh Food in Small Spaces" by Michael Guerra