



## Starting a Home Garden Using Pots

by *Larry and Leslie Cook*

Many of us have been limited in our options of what we can do over the past year. Perhaps some of you have a home vegetable gardening as one of those things that you want to do this year. Long-time gardeners, frequently hear people say they would like to start gardening, but just do not know where or how to start. Here is what we tell folks who want to get started on a home vegetable garden.

There is a large group of trained volunteers in all 50 states that are available to anyone with gardening questions and challenges that need to be addressed. That group is the Master Gardeners (MG): folks who work closely with their local Cooperative Extension offices to assist anyone in their area with getting started on their home gardens and answering questions about gardening. In Delaware, each county has an active group that is affiliated with the Cooperative Extension departments at University of Delaware and Delaware State University. All three county MG groups have help lines and conduct workshops to assist anyone interested in sustainable gardening topics.



We recommend starting small. Success in home gardening works best when you start with a manageable area. Decide on a location that works as long as there is lots of sun available.

Instead of digging up part of your yard, start your garden with a few inexpensive two or three-gallon pots. This allows you to move plants around to maximize plant sun exposure, and it saves time and money preparing an in-ground area.

### Checks lists

Steps on how to start your home potted veggie garden:

Use pots on porches and patio areas. Choose a sunny location.

Buy 2- or 3-gallon nursery pots (make sure they have holes in the bottom to drain water), plus some potting mix. Buy small plants (or seeds) and as they grow, replot them into bigger pots.

Wait until at least mid-to-late-April for warm enough weather and warm soil. Delaware's last frost is usually around the first week in April.

Herbs and many veggies, and flowers, can be grown in pots. Plant 2-3 plants in a larger pot. If you have more herbs than you can use, cut branches, tie them together and hang them up in a closet to dry out, then put in a jar for later use.

Tomato and pepper plants also do well in pots. They take longer to produce than most other veggies and need more heat. Once they get tall, tomato plants will need some support: install a long pole and tie the plant to it loosely to keep it upright when the tomatoes are ripening.

### Move pots indoors

Pots can be brought indoors when it gets too cool outside. Protect your floor with plastic from pot drainage.

Select your seeds or small plants. Lots of veggies can be grown in pots, including tomatoes, bush beans, herbs, lettuce, spinach, peppers, eggplants and strawberries, to name a few. We have seen potatoes, squash, onions, asparagus and sweet potatoes grown in larger pots. Pots allow you to start many plants indoors, then when the soil and ambient temperatures are right, transplant them to a larger pot and move them outside.

When placing your potted veggie garden outside, consider how you are going to water your plants, as potted plants need more frequent watering than plants placed directly into the



soil. It's best to get pots with a drain hole in the bottom. You should also get drain trays or saucers to place under each pot. This allows excess water to be stored in the tray, which can be used by the

plant when needed. Maintaining a regular watering schedule for your garden is important for good plant growth, the amounts will vary, so check the seed packet or plant label directions. You may also contact your local MG help line for recommendations.

As your plants grow, look over each of them to see if you have any unwanted leaf chewers, or discoloration of the leaves. Also watch for flower development, followed by the signs of fruit growth. If you want to extend your growing season, start an additional pot with seeds or plants. Lettuce, spinach and bush beans are good candidates for sequential planting.

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Water plants at the pot level, not from above. This prevents fungus from growing on leaves.

## Start an outdoor garden

If you are ready to start an in-ground garden, choose a site with lots of sunlight. Be mindful of your water source.

Consider doing a soil test to see if you need to add nutrients to the growing area. Contact your county MG office for details.

Pick an area along the side or back of the house, tools needed are shovel, hand trowel. Dig up the soil about 6-8 inches to loosen it. Mix in potting soil to add nutrients and lighten the soil. In larger areas, you can grow herbs and vegetables noted above, plus lettuce and spinach for good greens that you can sequentially grow from seed. Regular watering is needed, as noted above.

Watch for pests – leaf chewers, slugs, and digging animals. If noticed, consider netting the veggies and/or adding a low fence around the area.

## More Information

For more information about Master Gardener workshops, garden helplines, presentations, becoming a Master Gardener Volunteer, or other activities, please visit these websites.

UD Website - <https://www.udel.edu/academics/colleges/canr/cooperative-extension/environmental-stewardship/master-gardeners/>

DSU Website- <https://cast.desu.edu/cooperative-extension/agriculture-natural-resources/delaware-master-gardeners>