



Urban Harvest

Follow the Sun with Container Kitchen Gardens

By Suzy Fischer

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We are a month past the summer solstice and most of our gardens still are getting plenty of sunshine. However, more Houstonians are living in three- or four-story townhomes, which consume most of the land they sit on.

High-rise condominium and apartment housing is now home to many living in the inner city, and high-density housing can play havoc with plans for a kitchen garden. Container gardening is a great solution for gardeners who are challenged by available sunlight or the lack of proper space, as well as those who don't have the time or energy for a full-blown garden.

Sunny areas in any given urban lot change from the back to the middle to the front of the garden as the sun's position in the sky changes. As the sun sinks and rises in the seasonal sky, containers can be moved to follow the light, allowing for example, an uninterrupted fall tomato harvest as the sun sinks from its fairly high position when the plants are planted in August, to a relatively low position when they are harvested in October and November.

Ideally, large containers offer the best promise for a bigger, more successful harvest, but they can be heavy and if your plan is mobility that can be a problem. Here lies the importance of container selection. Many gardeners have a collection of clay pots idly occupying a corner of the potting shed that could easily be drafted into action. But, before pulling out the potting soil, evaluate those pots for the ability to meet your needs.

Today, it is easy to find plant containers made from polystyrene or fiberglass that are light weight and good looking. But selecting containers need not be limited to traditional garden pots. As long as it can hold soil, has the ability to drain (or you can create drainage holes), and the material is non-toxic, you can use it as a planting container.



Galvanized stock tanks come in a variety of sizes, mostly large. The smallest I've found is four foot diameter. But, their large size allows for ample planting area. Relatively speaking, they are also fairly inexpensive.

I like using galvanized stock tanks from the local farmers' supply store. They come in a variety of sizes, and you can plant a fairly complete kitchen garden in a single tank. Because they tend to be on the larger side, most are too heavy to move after planting, but sturdy castors can be applied to the bottom to make them mobile.

Though stock tanks aren't your typical garden planter, they're not that far outside the box. Remember, anything that will hold soil, drain water and isn't toxic will work. Terra cotta chimney flues or concrete drain pipes will work as well as old rubber garden boots, a worn out bath tub, or the bed of a retired pick-up truck - former Houstonian and lettuce queen, [Camille Waters](#), put her old truck into service.



An example of extreme container planting, which could include terra cotta chimney flues, concrete drain pipes, old rubber garden boots, a worn out bath tub, or the bed of a retired pick-up truck.

Careful consideration should be given to the soil mix used to ensure optimum yield. High-quality soil mixes can be purchased from a local garden center. Look for mixes that include peat moss, which is acidic and holds water well; Vermiculite, which provides some nutrients and aids in holding water; and Perlite, which loosens the mix and allows air movement.

Some mixes contain Hydrogels (hydrophilic polymers), which absorb water then slowly release it to plant roots. Others contain fertilizer, but if you're growing organic, be sure you know what type of fertilizer you're getting.

If you have an existing irrigation system or the ability to install one, dedicate a zone to your containers so irrigation times can be adjusted as needed. Micro-sprayers or spray stakes connected by spaghetti tubing to a drip manifold are most efficient at delivering water to the root zone. Micro-sprayers are available with valves, which can be turned off, and spray stakes can be inverted in between planting time when water is not needed.



Micro sprayers are available with valves so water can be turned off at any given emitter when not needed.

After you've filled the container with soil mix and installed irrigation, all that's left is planting and celebrating the harvest. In between, you may have a few questions that can be answered by visiting our website at UrbanHarvest.org, enrolling in one of our classes, or becoming a member.

This column is produced by Urban Harvest. Learn about gardening classes, community gardens and orchards, farmers markets and more at www.urbanharvest.org.