

# From Our Garden to Yours

## A guide to home container gardening ↴

### STEP ONE: CHOOSE YOUR PLANTS

Some of the best moments of gardening come before you even break ground—the hours spent in anticipation, browsing through seed catalogs and plotting what’s to come. When picking what to grow, the first thing to think about is whether you’re growing outdoors or indoors. Most vegetables will need at least six hours of direct sunlight a day, so if you only have indoor space you should contemplate purchasing grow lights.

If you’re growing indoors and don’t want to invest in grow lights, herbs are a good choice. They often like indirect light, they do fine in average soil, and they don’t require special attention. Basil, mint, oregano, sage, rosemary, and thyme are all good options; as well as being easy to grow, they’re great to have on hand when you’re cooking.

Grow your vegetable outdoors if you can. You can start seeds indoors in pots, and then slowly help them adjust to being outside, either in pots or in the ground. Seeds do well if they are first pampered with water, light, and warmth, and then gradually introduced to harsher, less predictable conditions outdoors. Seed packets tend to have good guidelines about when and how to plant, so read them carefully and follow their instructions. If you’re planting in pots on a patio, a fire escape, or a window, you can grow tomatoes, peas, lettuces, arugula, string beans, and baby beets, spring onions, and chard (just for a start.) Avoid vegetables with deep roots (like parsnips), those with a long growing season (like brussels sprouts) or with high demands for food, water and nutrients (like pumpkins.)

Once you’ve made your plans and bought your seeds, it’s time to turn to picking out your container and your soil.

### *At the Yale Farm*

We choose our crops based on a number of criteria: because they are especially delicious, are easy to grow, or because they create valuable teaching moments—artichokes, for instance, show that it is possible to grow traditionally Mediterranean crops in Connecticut.

For more information on what we choose to grow and how we grow it, visit our website at [yale.edu/sustainablefood](http://yale.edu/sustainablefood) and navigate to “The Farm” for more information about our practices.

STEP TWO:  
CHOOSE YOUR  
CONTAINER,  
YOUR SOIL, AND  
A SUNNY SPOT

*The Container*

The size, shape, and material of your container will vary depending on what you're growing and where you're growing it, but there are some basic qualities every container should have:

*Drainage* No matter what you're growing, make sure the container you use has a way for water to escape from the bottom. If your container doesn't have any holes in the bottom, you can cut them yourself—they should be about the size of a dime: big enough for water to get out, but not so big that soil escapes. If you don't provide for proper drainage, your plants will suffer from overwatering or fungal infections.

*Depth* 8" is a good minimum. Roots need room to grow.

*Material* The material may be ceramic, plastic, wood, or even cardboard. However, whatever material you use should be sturdy enough to withstand watering and consistent sunlight. Terracotta or clay are more permeable, and help protect plants from overwatering.

The quality of your soil will determine whether your plants are healthy or not. When gardening with containers, you need to be especially wary of soil compaction. Compacted soil restricts root growth—don't pack it in.

*The Soil*

Soil should be well-drained, have a light texture, and be nutrient-rich. Make a soil mix that's equal parts peat, perlite, and compost. You can find all three at garden stores, but you can also make your own compost.

*Peat*, which is partially decomposed vegetative matter found naturally in wetlands, is very light and holds water especially well. It doesn't provide many nutrients, however.

*Perlite* is a mineral naturally found in volcanic glass. It's great for aeration and water-retention, but it also doesn't provide many nutrients.

*Compost* is very nutrient-rich and has lots of biological activity, making for healthy and happy plants. Alone, though, it tends to compact easily—that's why a good mix also has perlite and peat.

*At the Yale Farm*

We make our own compost, and we take this process seriously. Good compost leads to visibly healthy, vibrant soil, with wonderful colloidal structure, high humus content, high water-holding capacity, good drainage, and the ability to produce amazingly healthy, pest- and disease-resistant plants that taste wonderful. Compost is an important component of fertile soil rich in biological activity: many farmers call it black gold.

Garden weeds, cast-off vegetable matter, and fall leaves make up our compost. Each fall, we compost leaves from Yale's campus; instead of becoming trash, they become crucial, nutritious additions to our soil.

## *The Sun*

This one's simple: pick a spot that gets good sun, especially in the early stages of planting. As usual, consult your seed packets: some plants, like tomatoes, thrive in direct sunlight, while salad mix can use some shade. Use your space, and the sunlight it gets, wisely.

## STEP THREE: HELP IT GROW

Maintaining the right level of soil-moisture is crucial to growing healthy plants. Seeds, and seedlings, need to be in moist soil all the time. Once the plant has taken off, here are some tips on how to water well:

*Use more water, less often.* It's better to water in higher volume with less frequency than to water a little bit every day. This helps avoid fungal growth.

*Err on the side of under-watering.* When plants aren't getting enough water, their leaves begin to wilt. It's easy to fix and easy to diagnose. If you over-water, however, you might not notice that roots aren't getting the oxygen they need until it's too late.

*Avoid wet leaves.* Try to water the soil, not the leaves. If the leaves get wet, they more easily grow fungus.

Keeping your plants healthy is the best defense against pests and diseases. Overcrowded pot-bound plants will be especially susceptible, so make sure to thin your plants, or transplant them into larger pots. ♣

## *At the Yale Farm*

We manage pests and weeds holistically; a healthy plant is less likely to fall prey to a pest than an unhealthy one. Healthy plants grow in healthy soil, so we work on building the health of our soil with compost, rock powders, and leaf mulch. We choose to plant at optimum times throughout the season and practice stress-reducing methods like mulching. We see problems in our garden as indicators of our own imperfect practices, and as an opportunity to ask how we can improve our agricultural practices.

To control weeds, we keep them from going to seed, cultivate early, and do additional hand-weeding whenever needed. Cultivation takes weeds in the "white-hair" stage – just after germination, when their root system is a single white strand. This interrupts the growing cycle before weeds can firmly establish themselves, and become more beastly to pull out.

Visit [yale.edu/sustainablefood](http://yale.edu/sustainablefood) to find more information about the work we do at Yale and other resources for learning how to garden.

