

# HOW TO GROW YOUR OWN URBAN VEGETABLE GARDEN

Simple steps to create your own little green patch  
and enjoy the harvest.





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Photo: Markus Spiske / unsplash.com

## Why should you have an urban garden?

Do you think that living in a small apartment in the busiest part of the city means you can't have a vegetable garden? Today it's easier than ever to create a small garden in your home and enjoy the benefits of nature on your balcony or even in your window.



Photo: Peter Zagar / unsplash.com

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**In Australia, most of the population is concentrated in built-up, urban areas. But we don't have to forego the pleasure of having our own little harvest. For people who live in the city, surrounded by buildings and concrete, an urban garden offers a refreshing connection with Mother Earth.**

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Creating and maintaining an urban garden is much easier than you may think. Like most things, it requires dedication, skill and a little creativity in making the most of the space. It's also important to decide what you want to plant and how to do it. This handy guide will help you make those decisions.

# What will an urban garden do for you?



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Looking after an urban garden can generate many benefits for you and your family. Aside from being an enjoyable hobby, your urban garden will help you to improve your diet and instil values of personal responsibility and collaboration in your family. The advantages or benefits include:

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- An urban garden adds a touch of nature to your home. It will be a small oasis amid the urban jungle, characterised by cement, asphalt, vehicles and overcrowding.
- Gardening is a relaxing and creative activity that can help you cope with stress, worries, the daily grind, and the busy pace of life in the city.
- Maintaining an urban garden will give you and your family access to fresh, healthy food. Your urban garden will produce tasty, nutritious food that's completely controlled by you. Once you taste your first crop, you won't want anything else. You might even become a more responsible and demanding consumer.
- Your urban garden will be a practical source of personal development and education for you and your family. Learn about the circle of life for different plants and the care that each crop needs. Understand the relationships between living things, and see plants as nature's own solutions to pollution. If you have children, you can teach them these lessons and share wisdom with your loved ones.
- The cultivation of your own urban garden will reinforce positive values in you, which you can apply to other areas of your life: respect, care for nature, satisfaction for a job well done, productivity, teamwork, perseverance and patience.

# Simple steps to create your own urban garden

Creating your own urban garden is much easier than you might imagine. You simply need to remember a few simple rules before you dive in and get your hands dirty. Take note and dig in!



## 1. Basic elements

### The space: What's the ideal place for an urban garden?

The beauty of urban gardens is that they can adapt to any place or space, however small it may be. You just have to be creative and make the most of the space that's available. There is one essential rule for growing a fruitful small garden: you must choose a well-lit place. We'll explain why in the next section.

So, if you have a small terrace, your best option is to grow your crop in an elevated planter box or in raised containers of different sizes. This way, your plants get more sunlight and you don't have to work on the ground, which is much messier.

At your local gardening supply store, you'll find containers, racks and planters of all shapes and sizes. Are you handy with DIY and recycling projects? Why not make your own raised planter bed or planter box from scratch? You can follow the instructions in this [WikiHow](#).

If you have a balcony, which is usually a little smaller than a terrace, a vertical garden or living wall might be right for you. Vertical gardening is a practical, innovative space-saving solution. It's perfect for ornamental, medicinal, aromatic vegetables and plants — even for small fruit trees. Vertical gardens are also ideal if you want to grow in indoor spaces.



As with raised gardening containers, you'll find lots of different planter models designed for vertical gardening.

However, many people prefer to recycle boxes, crates or plastic bottles to personalise their urban gardens. Some even build garden furniture made from pallets. The guys from [Milkwood](#) blog show some great examples of nifty, sustainable projects.

If you don't have a terrace or balcony and your only option is a window, don't worry — you can still cultivate plant life. If you have large windows you can be extra resourceful and create a vertical structure for your crops. However, if you prefer to use the

window sill (much safer for you and your neighbours), you can create a small, cosy nook to grow aromatic plants in traditional pots or small window boxes.

A Japanese kokedama will also look great in your window. Kokedamas are balls of moss-covered soil, from which an ornamental plant grows. The moss collects moisture and feeds your plant, as well as protecting the roots. And the best part: kokedamas are very easy to look after. The moss ball only needs to be dipped in water once a week, so you save water and they don't need any type of pot. The ABC's [Gardening Australia](#) website explains how you can try this unusual technique, from scratch, at home.



Photo: Daniel Tseng / unsplash.com

## The light: The life-force of your urban garden

As we mentioned earlier, light is essential for your urban garden to survive. Without sunlight, plants don't get the energy they need to photosynthesise and grow.

If you want your urban garden to thrive, the plants will need enough hours of direct sunlight. For best results, your garden should be facing north or northeast, with minimal shadow.

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**Don't worry if your gardening area isn't saturated with natural light. It's also possible for your garden to flourish with only a few hours of light, or facing a different direction. But if you have the option, choose the space with the most light.**

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Be aware that different crops need different amounts of light. For example, if your urban garden is flooded with sunlight in summer, choose robust crops, such as tomato or chilli. On the other hand, if it receives less sun, choose crops such as spinach or lettuce. However, later we'll explain more about which crops will grow best in your urban garden.

## The substrate: The vital food for your crop



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The substrate is the soil that you will use to grow your plants. The choice of a good substrate is critical for your crop to have all the necessary nutrients and to grow strong and healthy.

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### So, the right substrate will ensure:

- Anchorage
- Oxygen for the roots
- Adequate moisture retention
- Nutrients

### The most common types of substrate are:

- **Multi-purpose soil:** This can be found in all garden shops. Multi-purpose soil doesn't have enough nutrients to sustain your garden, nor does it retain enough water. But it does offer good anchorage to plants, so you can use a small amount mixed with other types of soil.
- **Peat:** This spongy material is perfect for growing plants, although it needs to be combined with a fertiliser to increase the number of nutrients.
- **Coconut fibre:** This organic substrate is very spongy, light and keeps the roots hydrated and oxygenated.
- **Humus:** This is one of the least recommended substrate components, as it may contain toxic substances. It's also quite poor in nutrients.
- **Compost:** This substrate component is rich in nutrients, retains water and allows air to flow through. Better yet, you can make it yourself with the organic waste you produce at home.
- **Perlite:** This is a type of white rock which improves drainage and aeration. It contains no nutrients and it's advisable to wear a face-mask when working with it.
- **Vermiculite:** This mineral has great water retention capacity, and contains iron and magnesium.

As we have mentioned, the best option is to combine several types of substrate together. As you experiment with your urban garden, you will discover which kind of soil works best for you. But we suggest a mixture of substrates as your starting point.

**So, for an urban garden you should combine:**

- 40% coconut fibre
- 20% multi-purpose soil
- 15% compost
- 15% fertiliser
- 10% vermiculite

To enrich the soil and provide more nutrients to your plants, you should use fertiliser, such as vermicompost or worm compost. This is one of the best manures as it contains a large quantity of nutrients and you won't harm your plants if you overuse it. You can even set up your own worm bin and let the worms recycle your food scraps and other organic material into nutrient-rich vermicompost.

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**All of the fertilisers, composts and substrates outlined here can be found in most garden shops.**

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Once you have prepared the soil and planted your garden, we suggest covering the surface of the soil with a layer of mulch or vermiculite. Mulching involves spreading a layer of organic materials (leaves, wood chippings, bark, etc.) to trap moisture in the soil, deter weeds and improve soil temperature.

### ADVICE

**Every time you finish a growing cycle and you remove the plants, it is a good idea to turn the soil over. This way:**

- You avoid compaction, which happens over time.
- You improve porosity.
- You avoid cracks forming.
- You replace nutrients





## The water: The most efficient irrigation systems

When you start growing your own vegetable garden, you have to be careful with watering — it's very easy to overdo it. Don't worry, it's a common mistake for first-timers! Too much water can flush out the soil's nutrients, leaving the plants without enough food.

**The key is to maintain a constant humidity, adjusted to the time of year. This can be achieved by:**

- Manual watering with a watering can in gardens of 3 or 4 pots.
- Install a drip irrigation system with a programmer in larger gardens.
- Use self-watering window boxes. They have a water tank on the bottom that keeps the substrate constantly moist.

## The crop: Seeds or seedlings?

After choosing what you want to plant, the next decision that the urban gardener must make is the choice between seeds or seedlings. If you choose seeds, you'll see the whole germination process. However, it's a more delicate and laborious process because you have to be very careful when you transplant them. Some species are very resistant to transplanting, such as lettuce and cabbage. Other plants, such as courgette, watermelon and cucumber, are more sensitive to transplanting and the roots can be easily damaged.

Seedlings, on the other hand, are plants in their first phase of life, so you bypass the first stage of germination. This makes it much easier to start your urban garden, although some of the magic of seeing your crop grow is lost.

In any case, all garden shops sell both seeds and seedlings. And if you can't find exactly what you're looking for at your local gardening store, you can even buy seeds and seedlings online.



Photo: Eduardo Jaeger / unsplash.com

## 2. Sowing, transplanting and harvesting

Once you have all the material prepared and have chosen the right place, it's time to get stuck in and start to breathe life into your urban garden.

The first task is sowing, which you can do in a seedbed. In this way, you will protect the fledgling plant and increase its chances of survival. The seeding process is divided into two phases: cultivation and transplantation to the final container.

**The ideal time for transplantation is when the first buds arrive. Follow these steps when you are ready to transplant your plants:**

- Water the roots and surrounding soil a little, so that the plant can slide out of its seedbed easily. You have to be especially careful with some plants, like cucumber or zucchini.
- When planting in the final container, gently pat down the soil around the stem to eliminate any pockets of air between the roots and the soil.
- The first watering after transplantation should be generous, to anchor the roots and help the soil settle.



Photo: Markus Spiske / unsplash.com

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**As we have pointed out above, some plant species are very sensitive when transplanting. With these plants, it's best to sow them directly in the final container to make sure they will survive.**

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Harvesting is the most fun and gratifying part of the work in the garden. But it's very important to choose the right time to harvest. The ripeness of the fruit is a common indicator, as in the case of tomatoes. Although some fruits and vegetables must be picked before they ripen, such as cucumbers and courgettes.

This small guide describes the plant species that will grow best in your urban garden. Most major Australian cities have moderate weather conditions year round, so we have outlined the best periods for planting, transplanting and harvesting in a temperate climate. If you live in a colder or more tropical region, your gardening timelines may vary.

Plant	Sow	Transplant	Harvest
Eggplant	August–September	October–November	January–April
Lettuce	August–November	September–December	90 days
Potato	August–November	Do not transplant	December--March
Capsicum	August–October	September–November	150 days
Leek	August–January	October–March	150 days
Tomato	August–November	September–December	150 days
Celery	September–December	At 60 days	April–June
Zucchini	September–October	October–November	90 days
Pumpkin	September–October	October–November	120 days
Turnip	September–April	Do not transplant	60 days
Cucumber	September–December	At 30 days	100 days
Beetroot	September–December	Do not transplant	90 days
Carrot	September–May	Do not transplant	100 days
Artichoke	September–October	October–November	December–January
Cabbage	September–May	At 30-60 days	150 days
Strawberry	May–July	Do not transplant	October–December
Green bean	October–January	Do not transplant	90 days
Watermelon	October–November	At 30 days	120 days
Melon	October–November	At 30 days	120 days
Cauliflower	December–March	February–April	180 days
Broccoli	September–December	October–January	120 days
Spring onions	September–November	October–December	December–February
Spinach	March–June	At 30 days	60 days
Pea	March–August	Do not transplant	120 days
Broad bean	March–August	Do not transplant	120 days
Garlic	April–June	Do not transplant	October–December
Onions	June–September	July–October	November–March
Radish	All year	Do not transplant	30 days

It's that easy to create your own little green patch and enjoy the benefits of naturally home-grown food.

**Get back to nature – don't let the city stop you!**



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