

## The Incredible Shrinking Garden

Container gardening brings food, color, health, art, design and native appeal to small spaces.

By [Brenda Rees](#) 02/25/2016

Why bother to shrink a garden from a field to a vessel? That depends on the gardeners — whether they're arty, back-to-nature, health-conscious, foodie or design-minded. There's a container garden to please them all.

At first blush, container gardening may seem like the lazy man's way to landscape (No digging! No weeding! No heavy garden tools!), but the nuanced constraints and commitment necessary to successfully grow plants in a pot involve more than meets the eye.

The numerous joys, however, can propel lethargic and timid green-thumbers off the couch to tend to herb trays in the kitchen, prune potted citrus trees on the patio or enjoy perfume from blooming buds in nearby colorful containers — even when El Niño storms are raging outside.

Big or small, gardening is good for the soul. And micro-gardener Anne Gibson says it was instrumental in saving her life. "After my cancer diagnosis, I wanted to regain my health by feeding myself the best possible food," says Gibson, an avid container gardener/blogger/lecturer based in Australia ([TheMicroGardener.com](#)). She'd grown up eating fresh fruits and vegetables from an acre of land in the country, but now in the city, she was completely surrounded by concrete. "I had to put on my design head and see other possibilities, like vertical growing, bracketing over fences, clever use of containers," she says. "It's a challenge that continues to inspire me."

Container gardening is often born out of necessity. Gibson, who's lived in 16 different places since she left home, says gardening in containers allows her to take her plants with her when she moves. "They feel like they are an extension of my family, like my kids," she observes. "Some are easy and others are high-maintenance."

For beginners, Gibson suggests planting lettuces, arugulas and radishes because "they sprout quickly and are satisfying to watch grow." Also consider green onions, which are flavorful all year long, and microgreens of broccoli and baby lettuces, very popular these days.

To make it even easier for culinary horticulturists, Oakland-based Back to the Roots ([BackToTheRoots.com](#)) offers pre-packaged containers of herbs and mushrooms that can be placed anywhere. These ingenious and convenient little cans and boxes are perfect for small spaces, but you will need to repot them once they grow bigger. The company also sells a tabletop self-cleaning fish tank to hydroponically grow your choice of plants in a closed-loop ecosystem.

Ready for a bigger challenge? Try huckleberry, a California native plant that "actually grows faster in containers than it does in the ground," says Pete Veilleux of East Bay Wilds Nursery, also in Oakland. He adds that an outside collection of the fruit-bearing shrub can produce a "nice natural privacy screen; they do get six feet tall." And trees may be able to top the height restrictions of conventional fencing. (When employing trees or tall plants as a living fence, make sure they don't block sight lines of traffic or conflict with local building codes.)

Veilleux rattles off other natives perfect for containers: succulents *Dudleya gnoma* (munchkin live-forever) and *Dudleya hassei* (Catalina live-forever). "Put three colors of *Mimulus aurantiacus* (sticky monkey flower) together in one container; the new 'jelly bean lemon' color is fantastic," he says. And Veilleux's container of *Lewisia cotyledon* (cliff maids) has been flowering nonstop for four years. Yes, four years of constant blooms. "They do have to be fertilized regularly, a small amount every three months," he says.

In addition to the color and variety, Veilleux says some container plants can be used for home security. "Put a yucca plant like our Lord's candle [*Hesperoyucca whipplei*] under a window to deter would-be thieves," he says. "They grow eight to 10 feet and have sharp pointy leaves."

While the sky is the limit for creative container gardening, there are some general rules of thumb for design, says Dave Bare, display horticulturist at Descanso Gardens in La Cañada Flintridge. Groupings should be geometrical — triangular or ball-shaped, for example — and odd-numbered, he says. "Create a distinct form and then accentuate from there," he says; in big containers he uses foliage as a foundation, then adds floral spots for color interest. "Marry the plant to the container," he advises, adding that a 1/3-to-2/3 ratio of plant to pot produces an aesthetically pleasing proportion.

Despite all the added tasks involved in container gardening, potted plants can make your backyard or indoor landscape design more complex and interesting. "Different plants have different requirements, but they can be side by side when they are in containers," says Bare. "Versatility is what makes container gardening very appealing."

