

Guide to Gardening at Home

with Limited Space and Sun

Cambridge Community Gardens

So you want to garden at home!

Gardening at home in Cambridge can come with challenges. You may not get direct sunlight or have much, if any, outdoor space. However, whether you are waiting for a community plot or simply want to garden, there are many ways to grow at home.

Equipment for gardening at home

Containers

Most vegetables can grow in containers that are 6 – 12 inches deep. For root vegetables like standard carrots and beets, 12 – 18 inches is better. Any container must have holes at the bottom.

Clay and plastic containers are both good options. Plastic containers hold moisture better than clay, while clay is heavier and sturdier. Small black plastic trays with dividers are good for seed starting or microgreens. For outdoor small spaces, half barrel planters can grow anything, including berry bushes.

Lights

Plants generally do better with supplemented light indoors. If you do have a south-facing porch or window, placing your plants there will give them the most direct sun. For plants getting less sun or with high light requirements, add artificial light. You can get a grow light, but an LED or fluorescent light will work too. If buying new, choose LEDs if you can for better energy efficiency.

Position it 12 – 24 inches above the plant. Closer placement could cause damage, and further placement is useless. Because of these needs, it is better to stick to relatively small plants if growing indoors. Place the light directly above the plant to prevent it growing sideways toward the light.

Soil

Make sure to use potting soil, not garden soil or top soil. Potting soil is light and fluffy, and it may contain moss, compost, bark, and added minerals. These elements help keep enough water while also draining the soil. Specific potting soils suit specific plants, so check the variety before purchasing.

Plants for gardening indoors/outdoors in small spaces

Look for plants that produce the most in a small space. For example, one container of regular carrots will only give a handful of carrots. One container of lettuce, though, will continually produce lots of lettuce. Leafing plants generally do much better indoors than fruiting plants. For those of you with small, sunny outdoor spaces, anything is possible!

Any plant you grow in a big vegetable garden can grow in a half barrel planter.

Herbs

Many herbs can be easily grown in large quantities in small containers. Basil, mint, cilantro, chives, parsley, and thyme are good options for indoor setups.

Vegetables

Leafy greens like lettuce, kale, spinach, Swiss chard, and bok choy can grow without full light. Peas, brussels sprouts, beets, fiddleheads, and ramps can also do well in different amounts of shade.

Vegetables like peppers, cucumbers, and cherry tomatoes grow well in small containers, but they need lots of light. These are good options for a sunny porch setup, for example. Cherry tomatoes are especially good for those new to gardening. You will produce tons of tomatoes even if you lose some to rodents.

Microgreens

A little bit of light, a lot of moisture, and 14 – 21 days will be enough to grow microgreens from seeds.

Citrus Trees

Though they need lots of light, small lemon or orange trees do well in small spaces and can be maintained easily.

Root Greens

Plant the white of a scallion, garlic, onions, or ginger, or just put them in a glass of water, and greens may sprout.

This may be the lowest-investment plant to grow – they start to do it just sitting in a pantry anyway!

Native plants

You can garden to support biodiversity even without much outdoor space or sun! See these spreadsheets from the Massachusetts Pollinator Network with:

- [New England native plants that grow in containers](#), and
- [plants that grow in a compact way](#).

Both spreadsheets have lots of shade-friendly options.

Indoor plant care

Watering

Just like for gardening outdoors, watering requirements will differ from plant to plant. It is important to research the specific water requirements of your plant type. However, plants in containers/indoors need more frequent watering than plants in beds. This is because soil dries out quicker in containers. If the top 1 – 2 inches of soil are dry (which you can test with your finger), it is time to water. With most container plants, this will be at least two to three times per week. Plants in larger containers will need less watering than those in small containers.

Also, soil in clay pots dries quicker than soil in plastic. Water just until you see it coming out of the bottom of the pot.

Even without rain, temperature and humidity still affect indoor plants. In general, hot/dry conditions call for more frequent watering. It is best to check plants daily during these conditions.

If your plants are wilting or turning brown/crispy, they are likely not getting enough water. If they are yellow and soft/mushy, they are getting too much water.

Fertilizer

Some processes that plants need to grow, like decomposition of organic matter, do not occur on their own indoors.

Fertilizer can make up for this. Fertilizing can be as simple as using your own kitchen compost, or you can buy a ready-made fertilizer.

There are many factors to consider when choosing a fertilizer. Does it match your plants' needs and your potting soil?

Is it organic? Certain types involve more frequent application than others. Will the use guidelines suit your routine?

Make sure you understand the specifics before purchasing.

Resources in Cambridge for gardeners

Plant and seed swaps

There are many events throughout the gardening season to get plants, seeds, and seedlings. They are also opportunities to commune and get advice from other gardeners. A few examples:

- MIT holds a swap in the spring at the Kendall/MIT Open Space.
- There are a few events on the Cambridge Public Library and Department of Public Works calendars. Even if it is not called a seed swap, if it is gardening related, there is a good chance there will be some seeds available!
- There are many casual community swaps throughout the season. Cambridge gardener Helen Snively (hmsnively@aol.com) holds two per season. She also sends out a monthly newsletter with gardening events in Cambridge and Somerville.

Public Works Free Seed Library

There is a library of free seeds at the Department of Public Works building at 147 Hampshire Street. Come by anytime to pick up seeds with thorough growing instructions on the back. Many of the seeds are indoor and shade friendly. The Public Works calendar will also have attached events like seed packaging days.

Farmers Markets

Lots of [farmers markets](#) in Cambridge have plants that you can buy to get started on your at-home gardening journey.