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## Planning for Spring: Container Gardens May be the Way to Go

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Let's think inside the box...or the container, to be more specific. Container-grown plants can live close to the kitchen door, convenient to watch, water, and harvest. They are easier to protect from deer and other critters. They largely avoid the weeds and diseases that sometimes visit in-ground gardens. Container gardens can grow at waist level, avoiding back strain for the grower. And when seasonal light changes, containers can move and chase sunbeams in another part of the yard.

No wonder the horticulture industry has brought its creativity to garden containers. Today, just about all edibles—including berries—are being grown in pots.

At Natureworks Garden Center in Northford, Nancy DuBrule-Clemente and the staff experiment with all kinds of container vegetables in their “veggie island.”

Her current favorite?

“We love Smart Pots,” a container made of sewn fabric, she says. “We use all the sizes from the large bags for tomatoes to the Big Bag Beds and other bed sizes. The value of the bags is that they air-prune the roots.”

Air-pruning occurs when root tips encounter air through the container's fabric. The exposed root stops growing, which is a good thing. Otherwise, roots will spiral around the pot, twist, or kink, none of which is good for vegetable production. Instead, air-pruned plants create new root branches.

“For potting soil, we often use Stonington Blend, an organic mix from Coast of Maine. It's all the plant needs,” DuBrule-Clemente continues, noting that when the season ends, “Leave the potting mix in the bags. In the spring, we remove a bit of last year's mix from the top and toss it in the garden. We add some fresh compost and organic fertilizer.”

The bags are then ready for another season. (Or, empty the bags and fold them up for compact winter storage.)

For my part, I can attest to Smart Pot potatoes. I used the last of my 2017 spuds in March 2018. I have since replanted the pots with new organic seed potatoes. Smart Pots and Big Bag Beds are cloth bags designed and made in the U.S. by High Caliper Growing of Oklahoma City. ([www.smartpots.com](http://www.smartpots.com))

DuBrule-Clemente recommends blending flowers and veggies in container gardens. For example, lettuce, dill, and cilantro go to seed in early summer.

“Mix in annual flowers so the pot continues to look good,” she says. “Then, when the spring veggies are done, plant a new cool season crop such as fall lettuce into the container.”

She reminds us, too, that when flowers intermingle with food crops, we increase pollination and attract beneficial insects.

Tomato lovers now have numerous varieties for container growing. According to Petra Page-Mann at Fruition Seeds, dwarf varieties are particularly good.

“Dwarf tomatoes maximize limited soil volumes and put their energy into fruiting, rather than vegetative, leafy growth,” says Page-Mann. “They're remarkably productive throughout the season.

“Indeterminate cherry tomatoes often do well in large containers, too, because limited soil volume forces them to focus on fruiting rather than vegetative growth,” she says.

Indeterminate tomatoes produce fruit all season long. Determinate tomatoes produce all at once, then cease production.

And what about the many colors available for tomatoes today?

“Colors offer nutritional values,” says Page-Mann. “All tomatoes are high in the antioxidant lycopene. If they have purple and chocolate hues, they offer anthocyanins to boot, which help reduce free radicals and fight cancer. If they have orange, there's more beta-carotene, which helps boost our immune systems. Yellow and white tomatoes have less acid and more vitamin C than red tomatoes.”

She says that Gold Medal tomato is her personal favorite.

Fruition Seeds ([www.fruitionseeds.com](http://www.fruitionseeds.com)) specializes in open-pollinated organic seeds for northern climates.

Ready to try containers? You can jump in, or maybe first read Edward C. Smith's book, *The Vegetable Gardener's Container Bible* (Storey Publishers, 2011), among other good books on the subject.

For my part, all my veggies will be container-grown this year for the first time. Tune in next fall for the report on the outcome.

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