



BY PATTI MORENO

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Also known as the Garden Girl, Patti Moreno was born and raised in Spanish Harlem. She started gardening 10 years ago to eat healthier and lose the weight she gained during her pregnancy. After much trial and error, Moreno transformed her Boston home's backyard into an urban garden that produces just about all the food her family eats. Her methodology can be used to grow food on fire escapes, rooftops, or even indoors. Check out some of Patti's unique tips and ideas at www.farmersalmanac.com

EASY WAYS TO GARDEN

EVEN WHEN YOU DON'T HAVE MUCH (OR ANY) BACKYARD!

■ **CONTAINER GARDENING** For the vast majority of city and suburban gardeners, some form of container gardening is a must. From traditional terra cotta to galvanized metal to more ornate pots, container gardens can grow a surprisingly large amount of organic vegetables for you and your family to enjoy. As with an outdoor garden, remember that plants are dependent on three major things: soil, water, and light.

Starting an indoor garden doesn't have to be expensive. Look around your kitchen for everyday things to use as seed starters and containers. Check what you have available and try to work with that. Think of your home or apartment as a part of the natural system. I use coffee cans and cups, takeout containers, and even the bottoms of water bottles to start seeds. Just make sure you allow

for good drainage by poking holes in the bottoms and placing them on plates or some other thing, so the water doesn't spill onto the floor or windowsill. Fill the containers with a layer of coarse gravel, then organic seed-starting soil, and plant the seeds. Once the seedlings have outgrown their containers, transplant them to bigger pots (clean empty coffee cans, chipped coffee mugs, or containers actually meant for plants) filled with organic soil.

You may want to choose containers that fit your décor, or ones that won't stand out from your decorations. That way, they will be less obtrusive and more a part of your home. Keep this in mind when choosing the right location as well. If the plants are in your way, you may get tired of moving them. It's best to place plants by south-facing windows for at least 6 hours of direct sunlight a day. Keep them away from windows that are drafty or too cold.

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■ **IDEAL CONTAINER CROPS AND VARIETIES** Leaf lettuce is a great indoor crop because you can start harvesting to eat in less than three weeks, when the leaves are about 2 inches long. I recommend trying the following varieties that I've had good luck with: Sunset lettuce, Four Season lettuce, and red and green romaines. Rocket (arugula) and red Russian kale also grow well in containers. A shallow 5-gallon container is best for all these.



Cherry and plum tomatoes such as Riesen- traube and Roma heirloom varieties flourish as well. Large 5- to 10-gallon containers must be used with tomatoes, and with vine plants like cucumbers and beans. A tomato plant can fruit all year, as long as it doesn't get too cold, and as long as it has well-composted soil.

Herbs also grow well inside. My favorites include parsley, purple sage, Genovese basil, borage, yarrow, and toothache plant. They all can be grown in 6- to 10-inch pots.

In order to extend the growing season, stagger the planting of your veggies by starting new seeds every two weeks. That way you'll always have fresh homegrown food.

■ **OUTDOOR GARDENING WITHOUT LAND** A window box is a great way to grow a garden without having to clear a space in a small yard, or if you have no yard at all. I especially love having window boxes at my kitchen windows, because that enables me to reach out and pick fresh herbs when I cook. Window boxes are convenient and easy to weed and water, due to the fact that they are usually waist high. If you place them near kitchen windows, you may easily be able to water them from inside. Window boxes also provide a pretty outdoor décor.



The boxes are inexpensive to buy and even cheaper to build. A box that is one foot wide by three feet long can provide all the fresh herbs needed in a growing season.

■ **PATIO OR DECK GARDEN** A patio with plenty of sunlight can be the perfect place to grow your own fruits and vegetables. On my patio, I have dwarf fruit trees, such as apple, orange, lemon, and mini bananas, in large containers. During the spring, summer and fall, they live outside. During the winter, I move them inside to protect them from the elements. People are often surprised at

how much fruit a dwarf or semi-dwarf fruit tree can produce. My first two apple trees produced two bushels of apples each, and both were less than six feet tall. Planting fruit trees is easy, but you have to remember to fertilize them regularly as they exhaust the nutrients in the containers' soil quickly. I recommend compost or worm tea for fertilizer to help keep trees healthy and fruiting year after year.

Another use for a patio or deck is to grow grapes. Grapevines are incredibly rewarding. They look great and soften the hard edges of a structure, while

providing an incredibly sweet fruit. And grapes leaves are delicious in Mediterranean dishes. Grapevines take a few years to get established before they start fruiting, but in that time, the vines add beauty and value to your home. Before you know it, you'll have homegrown organic grapes.



■ **4x4 GARDEN BED** If you have a side yard or a backyard you can start cooking (gardening) with gas. A raised bed is ideal when you have little outdoor space. In 16 square feet, a surprising amount of food can be grown. Pick seedlings of your favorite veggies and plant them, or sow the seeds and watch them grow. The great thing about raised beds is that you can extend your growing season into early winter. If you run out of room in one raised bed and have the space, add another the same size. Standardizing your raised beds affords greater efficiency in your garden. You can interchange trellises or custom high tunnels or cold frames, or any other accessories you may create easily and quickly. Adding seating around your raised bed will make it an inviting gathering spot for the whole family. I love organizing my raised beds with vegetable plants that not only complement each other while growing, but also complement each other in my cooking. I pick the seeds I plant only after reading cookbooks. My homegrown heirloom tomato sauce is a hit when I grow plum tomatoes, basil, parsley, oregano, and green peppers, all in 16 square feet.

If you really want to get dirty and have no space at all, look for local community gardens and sign up for a plot. With a little creativity and a bit of reading you can start growing a garden wherever you live—indoors, on the balcony or roof, in a small yard, or at your windowsill. If I can do it, you can too!