

# Chapter One

## Start Your Own Farm



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## Strategies For Growing Food In The Urban Setting

No matter where you live, there is always somewhere to grow food. What follows is an overview of four basic strategies for urban gardening. This is just to get your wheels turning. A little later we will get down to the nitty-gritty of how to grow food.

### **The four general strategies are:**

- 1** Container Gardening
- 2** Edible Landscaping
- 3** Community Gardening
- 4** Guerilla Gardening

### **Urban Growing Strategy 1: Container Gardening**

You might live in a high-rise, or maybe your landlord won't let you touch the landscaping. Whatever the case, if you have no access to soil, you can grow your food in containers on patios, roofs or balconies, or even indoors, if you have enough light. For practical suggestions regarding container gardening, please see page 81. What follows are ideas to help you envision different ways you can turn your apartment into a mini-farm.

#### **A Window Garden**

If you've got nothing else, you've got a window. Or we hope you do. Grow some herbs in your window. Herbs are a great way to get started on your farming career. They do well indoors, and don't need much care. Store-bought herbs are expensive and never around when you need them. Once you get used to having fresh herbs on hand, you'll never go back to the packaged stuff. Herbs are your gateway plants to a farming addiction.

First and foremost you need a sunny window, because herbs are sun lovers. You might find that herbs that grow well for you in the summer die off or go into suspended animation during the short, dark days of winter. If that is the case you should view them as a summer crop: grow as much as you can while you can and preserve them the excess for winter use. Just trim off the luxuriant growth, tie the stems in bundles and hang them upside down out of the sun to dry.

But given sufficient light, herbs are easy to grow indoors. Try the reliable window herbs first — chives, parsley, cilantro and thyme. Basil and rosemary prefer to be outside, but can be coerced into living indoors, especially if they

get to live outside part time. Herbs don't need plant food or special care. The only trick is to not over-water them.

If you have bright, south-facing window, you can go beyond herbs and try some other plants. Try this: coerce your the cat out of that sunny spot and plop down a cherry tomato in a great big pot and see what happens. Indoor plants do better if you supplement your sunshine with artificial light in the evenings. A traditional fluorescent bulb or a compact fluorescent will work well — just position the bulb as close the plants as you can. There is no need to buy fancy grow lights.

Beans can also grow in a south-facing window in a big pot. Use transparent monofilament to make an invisible trellis in front of your window, then plant pole beans and let them crawl up the wire to form a living curtain.

If you are lucky enough to have a giant south-facing window, treat the entire area in front of it as you would a balcony or patio garden. See next section.



Got a head of garlic just beginning to sprout? Break it up and plant the cloves close together, pointy side up in a pot and cover them with about an inch of soil. Keep slightly moist, but not soggy. Shoots will start sprouting up in about a week. Cut the green, garlicky shoots with scissors and use as you would chives or scallions — in salads or in cream cheese or in eggs.

These garlic shoots don't need much light, and are an excellent winter crop to hold you over when your other herbs are dead or just hanging on. Don't be shy about using them up though, because the shoots only have a lifespan of a month or so — they exhaust their bulb, and eventually peter out. As you use the shoots, keep poking new garlic cloves in the pot to keep the whole thing going.

## **The Patio/Balcony Garden**

The key to patio gardens is to maximize all available space in all directions.

- Use a combination of low growing plants, plants that creep up trellises and railings and fire escapes, and plants that grow in hanging pots.
- You can improvise a trellis by stretching rows of string or heavy monofilament wire between two points, like between the railing of your balcony and the roof. Vines can also grow on fire escapes, and

along stair rails. If you've never grown vining plants before, you will be amazed at how well they grab on to things.

- Group smaller plants on shelves, or arrange them in rows, with the plants in the back rows raised higher than the front, as if they were on a staircase.

Play with growing more than one thing in one pot. There is no reason to waste an inch of space. We are conditioned to seeing plants growing all alone in pots, or in tidy rows in fields, but nature doesn't think that way at all, and neither should you. The only thing you have to be a little careful about is to be sure that you don't combine plants with very different water and light needs. A sage plant and a lettuce plant wouldn't make good roommates, for instance, because the sage prefers some dryness. You can't go wrong matching types: all leafy greens have similar needs, as do most root vegetables. As you gain experience you can grow progressively bolder in your experiments. Try this:

- Fast growing things can be planted with slow growing things — radishes and carrots together, for instance.
- Sprinkle green onion seeds in different pots, among your lettuces, your greens, your beans, your tender herbs. A few green onions won't take up any room in a pot, and are good to have on hand.
- Plant two or three kinds of leafy greens together, for variety.
- Plant a cucumber and train its vine to run up a pole or trellis, then plant dill at its base. Then you will be all set to make pickles.

For small gardens you are best off giving priority to fruit-bearing plants, because those just give and give and give, unlike, say, a cabbage, which takes a long time to grow and gives you one meal in the end. So plant all sorts of beans and peas in the spring and tomatoes and melons and cucumbers and squash in the summer. You can get small varieties of zucchini and melons that are no bigger than softballs. Whereas these kind of plants usually need some sprawling room, the small-fruited varieties will do well on trellises.

When you are arranging your containers, you want to give the sunny positions to the plants that are sun-greedy, like tomatoes, peppers and eggplants. The rule of thumb for all food crops is that they need at least six hours of sun a day. But this rule is flexible. Your lettuces and root vegetables will tolerate some shade particularly in the heat of summer, when they actually appreciate it if other plants are running interference for them. Put these tender types under or just behind the sun lovers, or tuck them in shadier corner spots. Keep in mind that plants do not have to be in direct sun to thrive. A plant will pick up sun reflecting off the wall near it, or the concrete beneath it. If your balcony

tends to be dark, play with mirrors, white gravel or white boards to capture sunlight and bounce it to dark corners.

Think about jungles. In a jungle every available surface has something growing on it. Nature likes things lush. It does not care for modern minimalist aesthetics. You want your balcony to look like a jungle — kind of like that lady down the way with the 300 creepy spider plants on her porch, only your jungle is all food.

### **Rooftop Garden: The Holy Grail**

If you have access to your rooftop and an understanding landlord, this is the best possible situation for the apartment gardener, simply because it affords you so much space and light. You of course will want to make sure that the roof can bear the weight.

Rooftops are hot in the summer, freezing cold other times, and usually windy. Try to set up the garden in a spot that is buffered from the wind, or contrive some kind of windbreak. Constant wind battering will stress your plants, and interfere with their growth. Self-watering containers (Essential Project 5), which we recommend in all situations, are heavier than normal pots, but do insulate the plants from the extreme temperature fluctuations of the roof. They also save you from having to run up to the roof twice a day to water, and they also don't leak like regular pots.

I have lived in New York City for the duration of my residency in pediatrics and fellowship in pediatric neurology. So, it's been a long haul. Living by your values can be really difficult when you're busy and reside in a big urban center.

I have always tried to "reduce, reuse, recycle" but I was still disgusted by the amount of garbage we made each day. So, I began to vermicompost. We use the compost we produce mixed with potting soil on our indoor vegetable garden. While we do belong to a CSA (community supported agriculture) to get fresh organic fruits and vegetables in the warmer months, I still wanted to supplement with my own fruits and vegetables that I could pick fresh myself. I also wanted my children to have the experience of tending a garden and picking fresh food, even if it is a bit unnatural to raise crops indoors. Most importantly, I think that nurturing a garden is a truly spiritual experience. We have turned our bedroom into a semi-greenhouse by taking big five-gallon containers and filling them with mixed soil and compost. We placed them next to

windows but found we needed to supplement with artificial light as well. Our harvest has yet to come, but we now have climbing beans, Tom Thumb green peas, tomatoes of all varieties, sweet pepper, and many herbs.

My children have delighted in all aspects of this experience. They love having their worm “pets” and watching how they make our garbage into something useful. They are attentive to the plants, searching for aphids or noting that the leaves are looking dry. We have shown them that waste isn’t necessarily to be thrown out, but that it can be used as part of a lifecycle in which all matter has a meaningful role. We are trying to have less of an impact on the planet in our small way. All around, important lessons for city kids.

Maya Shetreat, New York, NY

### **Urban Growing Strategy 2: Edible Landscaping**

Edible landscaping is a good strategy to employ when you are colonizing any space visible to the public, whether you own the space or not. It is simply the practice of choosing landscaping plants on the basis of both looks and edibility. A turnip patch may only be beautiful to the enlightened, but many edibles are attractive as well as tasty and these can be put to use creating a practical, attractive landscape that gives you food in return for your investment of time, energy and water.

This is an ancient form of gardening: think of Roman gardens full of olives and grapes, or medieval cloister gardens that grew food and medicinal herbs for the monks, or colonial kitchen gardens with their climbing beans and apple trees. It's simply a practical way to interact with nature: the crops provide all the lush green and scents and flowers your eyes and your soul crave — and then you get to eat them. We propose that our tended gardens be woven into the fabric of our lives. The artificial separation between city life and nature will disappear.

Just imagine every yard, every median strip, every balcony, every roof and even every sunny window given over to food, healing herbs and habitat. Food can and should be grown in public spaces, along parking strips, in front of office buildings, in public parks. Every nook and cranny should be blooming with life. With a little rearranging any city could keep itself in fruits and vegetables. This grand vision may take time, but we all can begin in our own spaces.

## First Steps Toward An Edible Landscape

If you live in a house, or on the ground floor of a building, you likely have the advantage of soil at hand — the area around your front door. Or maybe you have access to some weedy common ground, such as the space between building units, or around the parking area. To an urban homesteader, any empty place means an opportunity to grow food. If you rent, you should work with the building manager or landlord to get permission to colonize these areas. If you own, you have to deal with the neighbors who are not used to seeing food grow in public. In both cases, attractive presentation helps smooth the way.

To overcome possible resistance to your farming, start by surreptitiously planting small, easy things like herbs and radishes or green onions around whatever is already there — usually that would be some kind of spindly, badly pruned shrub or uninspired ground cover.

If you have a flowerbed to trick up, consider some of these strategies for incorporating food with flowers:

- Liven it up with some colorful Swiss chard, bright colored, wrinkly red lettuce, or big purple cabbages.
- Plant strawberries around the borders.
- Nasturtiums have edible flowers, leaves and seed pods.
- Basil is a beautiful plant, and it gives you pesto.
- Chive plants throw up cute purple pom-pom flowers, which are edible themselves.
- Italian parsley is attractive, and so useful to have on hand for cooking.
- Pea plants have flowers just a little less showy than those of their floral cousins, the sweet peas.
- A pole or runner bean can grow up a fence behind a flower bed, or grow up the wall by your front door.
- There's nothing wrong with planting a cherry tomato plant in flowers. Just choose a "patio" variety (i.e. small and well behaved) so that it doesn't take over the entire bed.

You don't need to slave over starting seeds. All of these plants are easy to find in nurseries and in some farmers' markets as seedlings. If flowers are managing to grow in a location, odds are that the veggies will like it there too. Just dig a little hole and tuck them in there. Keep doing little interventions like this, and no one will notice that you are secretly farming.

## **Ambitious Edible Landscaping**

If you have control over an entire front yard, there are two basic ways for you to go. The first is a larger scale version of what we discussed above: you switch out familiar landscape elements with edible equivalents. Plant fruit or nut trees in your front yard instead of traditional shade trees. Plant berry bushes instead of useless shrubs. Replace your flower beds with beds mixed with edible flowers, strawberries, herbs and greens.

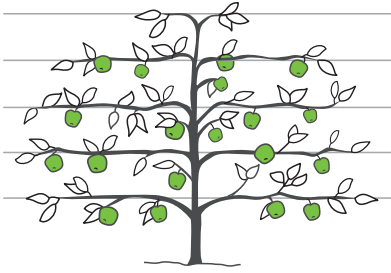
If you live under the tyranny of a neighborhood association and have to keep your front lawn, that's fine. Just encroach on it slowly. Widen the beds around the sides of the yard and pack them with edibles. Keep widening the beds a little more each year. By the time your lawn dwindles to a single square foot of turf, your neighbors will be converted to your side by your gifts of green beans and tomatoes.

The other route is more radical. You make no pretense of your yard being a traditional landscape anymore. You make it into a show garden, an elegant potager made up of several well arranged and tidy vegetable beds. This is more work than edible landscaping, which relies on perennial plants that are more or less permanent fixtures. It takes work to make an ever-changing vegetable garden look good all the time. But it may be worth it, particularly if your best sun exposure happens to be in your front yard.

To give your garden curb appeal plant colorful things and mulch your beds so they look neat. Add lots of flowers to the mix, and keep the flowers closer to the street. Most importantly, you'll want to keep all your gardening equipment hidden out back. The neighbors don't want to see your compost pile, all your tools and crappy plastic pots filled with seedlings. Treat the front yard as a show place, keep it neat, and the neighbors might surprise you with their acceptance.

## **Be A Tree Hugger**

No matter how you landscape, do not neglect to add as many fruit and nut trees as possible, choosing those which that work best in your region. They give you a lot of food for very little input. Maximize the number of fruit trees you can have in your yard by investigating dwarf varieties, and learning the value of pruning. Fruit trees can be kept quite small through vigilant pruning, but will still give a lot of fruit. They can even be grown flat against a wall so they take up no space at all. A tree trained into two-dimensionality is called an espalier. Some fancy nurseries sell young trees that are already trained in that shape, but you can train a young tree all by yourself. Espalier looks elegant, but is not difficult. You just have to encourage growth in certain directions, and clip off anything that grows contrary. Look for how-to's in a good pruning book, like Taunton Press's *The Pruning Book*, by Lee Reich.



### **Espalier**

Our neighborhood is pretty mellow, but when we planted our parkway with vegetables we wondered if the city or neighbors would have anything to say about it. It is a fairly attractive set up, consisting of two square raised beds, each with a wire obelisk in the center to act as a trellis. Wood chips cover the ground around the beds. After two years we've had nothing but pleasant comments from our neighbors, and no interaction with the city, though technically what we have done is illegal. Our neighbors are curious about what we are growing. We've discovered that many people don't have the slightest relationship with vegetables in their native state—they can't even identify a carrot top or a tomato plant. People come by with their kids so that the young ones can see what growing vegetables look like. We've met many neighbors that way, and have come to consider frontyard gardening a key to our own community involvement.

Whenever we meet a neighbor while we are working out front, we try to send them away with a little fresh produce, but we have not found that people are much inclined to help themselves to the produce in our absence. If they did, they'd be within the law, because the median strip that we plant in is public property, so that food belongs to everyone. But in our experience, tomatoes seem to be the only thing people take. We only grow cherry tomatoes in the parkway, and those are so prolific we can afford to lose some. No one ever touches the root vegetables or leafy greens.

### **Urban Growing Strategy 3: Community Gardens**

A community garden is a large parcel of land—urban, suburban or rural—that has been subdivided for use by individuals in the community. Some community gardens are guerilla ventures that have slowly become permanent, others are owned by their cities, others are owned by private individuals or foundations. Most are democratically organized, and being truly grass-roots organizations, no two are exactly alike.

When you join a community garden, you will be given a plot of ground to farm. The size of the plots varies a great deal, but something around 10'×15' might be a reasonable size to expect in an urban setting, though some are much bigger. You may have to pay a modest rent, or contribute to the garden in other ways. There may or may not be a waiting list to get a plot. Even if you do have to pay a small rent, it will be well worth it, because you will probably have access to free water, compost, fertilizer and tools.

Joining a community garden is an excellent option for any city farmer; not only will you get space to grow food, you will also become part of a community of experienced gardeners. For a beginner, this is invaluable. Beyond that, it will also ground you in your community. With so few public meeting spaces left to us, a community garden is a great place for neighbors to get to know one another and talk about what matters to them. Community gardens often interact with the greater community through outreach and education programs. They help tie the whole community together.

If there is no community garden available to you, start one of your own. The community garden movement is a vital part of the greening of American cities. If you don't start one, who will?

About six years ago I joined the Altadena community garden, which was started back in the 1970s. It was sort of squatted by a bunch of mostly African-American families, many of whom were from the South. They planted these pea patches or victory gardens and then it became part of the parks and rec. system of Los Angeles.

I grow mostly vegetables — all organic — and for the first year I'm starting to grow some flowers just for fun. My 300 square foot plot is huge for me, as a single person. I get 85% to 90% of my produce from my garden. A few specialty things I'll go to a farmers market for. I'm at my garden twice a week. It's all seasonal of course. I'm probably there for an hour or two a week. I could put in a drip system on a timer if I wanted to, but I like to actually go down there and hang out with the folks and get my hands dirty.

We happen to have two master gardeners in our garden who we use as resources. At our general meetings they give us information on how to control pests organically. People seem to be respectful of those who want to use chemicals and others that want to use organic methods.

This 94 year old gentleman, African-American, whose family was from the South gave me what are called rattlesnake beans. Its like a lima bean, a butter bean that you grow on a pole. They came from his great-great-grandfather, who was a slave.

When he gave these to me, he said, "These are special and you're a special person and I want to give you these things." I practically burst into tears right there.

Mary McGilvray, Altadena, CA

## Urban Growing Strategy 4: Guerilla Or Pirate Gardening

Urban gardeners have to be creative to get the most out of the small parcels of land that they can claim as their own. It can be particularly frustrating once you are in the farming mindset to see parcels of land going unused and unappreciated. That's when some people start to question who really owns the land.

Pirate gardening can take many forms, from casual interventions like tossing a few seed balls (see page 30) into the landscaping of an office building, for instance, or in a remote corner of a city park. At the time of this writing, gardening revolutionaries in London just celebrated their second annual harvest of lavender planted along the city roadways (see [guerillagardening.org](http://guerillagardening.org)). Guerilla gardening may be considered activism, an art form, both or neither.

If pirating vacant property doesn't appeal to you, take over land belonging to your friends, family or neighbors. It's a gentle form of piracy. Plenty of people would be relieved if you took over their yard maintenance for them, particularly if they got some homegrown veggies out of the bargain.

The two of us always look longingly at unoccupied stretches of city land, ones that seem to be begging to be colonized, but we've never pirated a piece of land ourselves. That's why we're glad to meet Taylor Arneson, who has planted multiple guerilla gardens around Los Angeles, claiming land everywhere from the 150 feet of the medium strip of Bundy Avenue (yes, the street made famous in the O.J. trials) to the banks of the L.A. River. On these

sites he plants some of the more sturdy summer crops, ones that can stand up to the punishing Los Angeles sun without coddling: corn, squash and beans, as well as fig and mulberry trees, both of which do well in this climate. He waters his gardens with the water belonging to the property, so one thing he always looks for before he begins planting is a working spigot.

Talking to him has convinced us that pirate gardening is not necessarily a confrontational activity. Though we'd expect that the owners would toss him right off the land when they discovered what he was doing, that has not proved to be the case at all. He claims that sometimes the vegetables do get picked, which he intends, but that he's never had to rip out a garden, nor ever had one ripped out for him.



### Taylor's Advice For Would-Be Guerilla Gardeners:

There's a couple of key things you look for in a guerrilla garden site — any soil is workable but ideally you want something that you can penetrate with a shovel. Preferably water — there should be water in close proximity that's available. Who it's owned by is a minor issue because tap water is so cheap that you can do a large garden for a few dollars a month, especially if you're growing things that are appropriate for the region and you use the water sparingly.

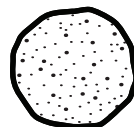
I don't go out of my way to approach the owners and I don't go out of my way to do it undercover either. I wait for the opportune time to have a conversation. So far I haven't had any problems. Usually the owners are pretty flexible and they're interested to help as long as they're not actively wanting to do something with the property.

There's a lot of benefits for both parties. They get their space to look better so they don't have as many complaints from the neighbors and I'm building soil for them for when they go to do landscaping in the future.

#### PROJECT

### HOW TO MAKE SEED BALLS

#### The seed ball is the Molotov cocktail of the urban homesteader



Peanut M&M sized balls made of seed and clay, seed balls are meant to be lobbed anywhere you want to grow something but can't really plant it and tend it in the traditional manner — a fenced off vacant lot, for instance. Or your neighbor's back yard. You just scatter the balls on the ground and leave them. In their clay coats, the seeds are protected from being eaten or blown away until the rains come. When the rain does come the clay softens and the seeds sprout in the balls, where they are nourished and protected until they get a good start in the ground.

Seed balls are an ancient technology, but they were popularized recently by natural farming pioneer and author of *The One Straw Revolution*, Masanobu Fukuoka. He calls them “earth dumplings” (*tsuchi dango*). They are an important part of his very hands-off methodology of raising crops. And though they are not well-known in North America, they are used all over the world in re-greening projects.

Fukuoka used them to grow grain without invasive tilling and sowing. Others have used them to green the desert or to reintroduce native species to wild areas. In the city, a great thing to do with seed balls is use them to reclaim waste land by introducing wildflowers and other “weeds” that feed beneficial insects and nourish the soil. But you can also try them out with seeds from plants that might feed you.

Be careful how you use these things. In the city it does not matter much where they go, but *never lob them into natural areas*. These balls work, and the seeds you put in them will end up in direct competition with natives.

Check with your nursery where you get the seeds to find out which plants grow best in your area without supplemental irrigation, and which plants are best for your local beneficial insects, and when to plant them. Some classic choices for feeding insects are: mustard, fennel, dill, buckwheat, clover, and wildflowers such as coneflower, goldenrod, yarrow, ironweed and sunflower.

#### **Ingredients:**

- Dry red clay, fine ground.

You can use potting clay or dig clay out of the ground, as long as you dig deep enough so there are no weed seeds in it.

The subsoil in most of the country is clay, so it is easy to find, especially at building sites or where roads are being built. If you use potting clay, be sure to only use red clay, because the other kinds might inhibit seed growth. Spread it out to dry and then grind it up between two bricks to make powder.

- Dried out organic compost of any kind.
- Seeds of your choice, one kind or a mix.

Mix one part seeds into three parts compost. Add five parts dry clay to the compost/seed mix and combine thoroughly again. Add a little water to it, just a bit at a time, until the mix becomes like dough. You don't want it soggy. Roll little balls about the size of marbles—be sure to pack them tight—and set them aside to dry in a shaded place for a few days.

To make the strongest impact, distribute these balls at the rate of about ten balls per square yard of ground.