



Balcony Gardening
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If you live in an apartment and have a balcony, there is almost sure to be a plant you can grow. Since balconies differ in sun and wind exposure, it is important to pick plants that both give pleasure and suit their environment. If you relax in a hammock or have your morning coffee on your balcony, you might enjoy more colour? Possibly you would like to create some privacy, or if your balcony is rarely used and doesn't get much sun you might enjoy growing a few herbs and some lettuce. If you have a hot southern or western location, be sure to decide if you are a dedicated watering person and calculate how far water must be carried through your apartment.

If your plans for gardening “above the neighbours” are ambitious and you hope to have a number of pots with small trees, flowers and vines, then it is wise to check on how much weight you are allowed by your building regulations. Check as well the rules regarding hanging planters and plants on railings and any other rules that might apply.. And don't forget the lugging aspect as you will need soil, plants, containers and perhaps a dolly or two so that you can move your pots about.

To reduce weight, use light-weight containers such as wood or plastic (there are great molded plastic pots that are cement look-alikes) and have a supply of styrofoam peanuts, perlite or vermiculite to fill up the bottom of containers. Ordinary garden soil is heavy – one cubic foot weights 50 to 90 pounds. A light all-purpose planting mix or a potting soil designed for containers will be lighter than ordinary soil and provide better drainage and air circulation around the roots.

Most herbs and leafy vegetables will grow in a minimum of 6 inches (15 cm.) of soil, but other vegetables with more root structure such as tomatoes may need as much as 12 inches (30 cm.). Intensive planting increases your yield and has the advantage that the plants shade one another minimizing water loss. You will need to fertilize regularly so to simplify this task. Investigate slow-release fertilizer beads.

Containers do best when there is some sort of clearance underneath them for air circulation. Drainage is crucial and you may need more holes or bigger holes than those already provided. Extra holes on the outside of your container an inch or so up from the bottom can aid drainage and runoff collection. Container plants need to be watered thoroughly so by lining the bottom of containers with landscape cloth or using sponges around drainage holes you can prevent soil from escaping along with excess water. Containers on legs provide space for trays to collect runoff, provide protection against stains and will keep peace with the tenants using the balcony below.

The microclimate on your balcony will determine whether you can grow African daisies or impatiens; tomatoes or cacti. Tomatoes, many vegetables and sun loving annuals need a minimum of six and preferably eight hours of sun daily. Parsley grows in either sun or shade but needs 10 to 12 inches (30 cm.) depth of soil. If you are growing trees, perennials, etc. and you want to overwinter them outside, check the zone numbers and buy two or three zones hardier than this area. Plants in larger containers will overwinter more reliably than those in smaller pots.

Heat can reflect off walls and make a sunny spot even dryer. Grouping a number of pots in one area will aid in conserving moisture. The practice of putting one pot inside another shields the root area of a plant from the baking sun and allows heat to escape up between the two pots. Other tips include using a mulch over the top of pots or lining pots with disposable diaper material (not the plastic bits). Most nurseries sell a soil moist product which reputedly holds 200 times its weight in water which it slowly releases when the soil begins to dry out. There are many plant minders and watering bulbs to look into depending on your needs. The bigger the pot the longer it takes to dry out so in a windy or sunny area use the biggest pots you can accommodate or afford. Don't hesitate to be inventive. Bushel baskets or wooden crates can be turned into good balcony containers.

Whole books have been written about container gardening on balconies. I hope this will inspire you to get started. Experiment and ask for advice from where you purchase your plants. You can also use the Master Gardener advice hot line or look at www.torontobalconiesbloom.ca for helpful ideas and links to more info. Don't miss out on the fun of being a balcony "potscaper".

Previously published in the Peterborough Examiner