



# Grow your 5 a day!

Grub's up! The beautiful '5 a Day' garden at last summer's Hampton Court Palace Flower Show

Raised planters allow much higher planting densities than would otherwise be possible. Heather Culpan explains how you can grow all of your recommended portions of fruit and veg in an area no bigger than the average living room

**W**e're constantly being told to eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day but how difficult is it to grow your way to this target? At last year's RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show garden tool company Burgon & Ball demonstrated in its '5 a Day' garden just how little space you need to do just this – and how beautiful the end result can look. The garden was a simple yet ingenious concept that anyone can replicate. Doing so allows you to pack a tremendous number of crops into

a tiny space. If you're particular with the produce you choose to grow it is possible to reach that five-a-day target, supplying over the course of a year enough for two people from just 10m<sup>2</sup> (12 sq yd) of planting space.

The key to getting such seemingly impossible yields lies in using the 'deep bed' method. This technique sees plants grown in deep, loose compost. As there's no soil compaction the delicate roots can grow straight downwards instead of outwards, allowing you to pack the plants in cheek by jowl.

## Getting it off the ground

You could start your own five-a-day garden by creating deep beds through double digging and then never walking on those areas again. But it is a back-breaking job and you've got to be disciplined to avoid treading on the soil. Using raised bed planters instead gives deep bed conditions in an instant. As plants are growing off the ground they are likely to get more sunlight and their roots will be warmed by the sun. It's a win-win situation for both gardener and plants.

The first things to decide when setting

**The deep raised planters mean crops can really be packed in to maximise yields**

up your five-a-day garden is where it is going to go and how much space to allocate. Most crops will benefit from plenty of sun and your spot should ideally be sheltered from prevailing winds. Don't despair if these conditions aren't on hand – you might have to be a bit more selective in what you choose to grow but there's still plenty of scope for success. I have had French beans, peas and new potatoes grow very successfully on a windy, elevated, partially shaded deck; nowhere in my garden gets sun for more than half of the day yet I've kept my family well fed over the year.

Another thing to consider is that it will be easier to look after your productive plot the nearer it is to the house. The more contact you have with your veg the better your crops will be. This is an often underrated key to success – simply spending a couple of minutes a day in your garden will tell you if more water is needed, if pests are taking hold and if crops are ready to pick (generally the more you pick, the more they produce).

### What to grow

The next thing to decide is what you want to grow. To get the absolute maximum yield from a small space you need to choose high-yielding crops such as runner beans, which are also useful as they grow vertically, taking up relatively little surface area. However, unless you are intent on a rigorous 'good life' experiment I'd suggest that first and foremost you grow what you like to eat, with a secondary look at your likely yield-to-space ratio.

Draw up a shortlist of your favourite salads, vegetables and herbs. Then, if you're new to growing, get hold of a good reference book or check out useful websites for crop-specific information; the Royal Horticultural Society's is one of the easiest to follow, with crop-by-crop growing guides. Try to get a feel for how easy it is to grow the crops. Some, such as courgettes, need almost no attention while others, including the likes of cauliflower, are notoriously tricky. A few crops are not recommended for raised planters and pots, generally because they tend to grow very tall and need a firmer base in which to anchor their roots. These include Brussels sprouts and sweetcorn. In addition, some crops, like leeks, take an awfully long time to mature, so if space is tight you might want to



consider whether you love them enough to dedicate precious space to them.

Think about whether each crop will be a continuously cropping one or a single pick. By that I mean will a plant keep on producing through the year (cut-and-come-again salad leaves, kale, tomatoes, beans etc) or will it spend its life reaching maturity to be harvested in one go (cabbage, hearting lettuce, carrots etc)? The latter group need careful successional planning to avoid big gluts followed by empty spaces.

In such a small garden with such big demands on it you will need to work out

a planting plan to shoehorn your crops into the space available. The planters used in the original five-a-day garden are available to buy from Burgon & Ball and come sized to suit the requirements of different crops: Veg and Tomato, Salad, Potato and Herb (there's also a window box if space is really limited). Pick planters to suit the crops you want to grow then draw a chart with the months of the year running one way and each of your planters the other and start to plot out what will be in

each during the various months of the year.

Have a look at the five-a-day website to see a typical planting chart. The five-a-day chart also has useful information on how many plants of each variety you can pack in per planter. You will find this is much denser than normal recommendations

– up to four times denser for some vegetables thanks to the deep bed conditions.

**Most fruits can also be grown in planters, including soft fruits such as raspberries. Peas (below), will give more than one picking**



### Plants or seeds?

The choice of how you start off your crops is yours. Watching things grow from seed is one of life's little joys and there is a wider choice of varieties at this level. Resist the temptation to sow the whole packet at once; sow small batches, every few weeks to achieve a succession of harvests.

Some seeds can be sown straight



Some leafy plants such as pak choi will crop well into early winter

Below: Deeper, lighter soil means packed-in plants!

into the planter, while others will need bringing on in a seed tray – the seed packets will guide you. Almost all seeds (bar the root crops in particular) can be started off in seed trays first on a sunny windowsill, greenhouse or propagator to give you an earlier crop than might otherwise be possible. Of course, sowing direct is considerably more straightforward.

Young plants hit the headlines last year when it was revealed some carrot plants were sold for £1 each. Since a carrot plant can only ever make one carrot this is not the most economical of ways to grow food! However, there are lots of other veg that make good sense to buy as young plants. Starting them off this way removes the risk of poor germination and plants tend to be sold in the right quantities for the small-scale domestic grower.

### The right compost

There are many different types of compost available and the choice can be overwhelming. I use a John Innes-based compost, which is soil-based and ideal for growing in raised beds as they are less prone to drying out. A soil-based compost is more easily re-wetted should it become dry.

John Innes composts come with different numbers in their title: number three is my mainstay and the best choice to fill planters. If sowing seeds straight into the planters it is best to put a layer of number one on the top (you can also use this for

sowing seeds into trays). The numbers in the title determine the amount and type of fertiliser in each. As well as water, it is fertiliser that is fundamental in achieving high yields from planters.

### Nutrition and watering

Any crop needs sunlight, fertiliser and water in order to thrive. If you've picked the sunniest spot in your garden there's not really anything else you can do about the first point. However, fertilising and watering are very much within your control.

The fertiliser present when you fill your planter full of compost will sustain plants for around six weeks. After that it is necessary to begin regularly feeding plants with additional fertiliser to keep them growing, producing and ripening. Fruiting plants (tomatoes, peppers etc) will need a different type of fertiliser to leafy crops (spinach, cabbage and so on). Check the packaging in the garden centre

to see which is suitable for your crops. Go for crop-specific fertilisers rather than an all-purpose one.

Crops grown in planters will need more water than those grown in the ground because there's no water table beneath them. In wet weather nature will provide enough but in drier periods

you will need to water as much as every day. It's worth remembering that fertiliser and water create healthy plants and healthy plants are less susceptible to pests and diseases.



## STEP-BY-STEP: Growing in raised planters



**1** Most crops can be started off from seed. Sow seeds in pots to get a head start. Paper pots made from old newspaper can be planted out intact, avoiding root disturbance.



**2** Seeds sown into seed trays can be kept elsewhere while other crops finish off. This overlap makes for the very best use of space with few redundant periods.



**3** Young plants can be set much closer together than traditionally recommended. It is this denser method of growing that gives the high yields required from such a small space.



**4** Some crops, especially root crops, can't stand root disturbance so need to be sown directly into the planters. Once they have germinated, thin them out to give each plant enough room.

## Planter favourites

**Tomatoes:** Stake vine tomatoes securely and pinch out extra shoots that grow between the main stem and leaf joints. Pay special attention to watering when the fruits have formed to avoid tough or split skins. About four plants will fruit all summer to provide a family with a good and constant supply of fruits. At the end of the season pick off un-ripened green toms before the frost gets to them and fry them in olive oil with a little salt.

**Cabbage and kale:** Cover them with a net – you will almost certainly be visited by cabbage white butterflies otherwise. Netting stops you having to check under each leaf every day and face the revolting job of scraping off any butterfly eggs.



**Spinach:** If it's in a very sunny spot pick the planter up and move to a partially shaded spot in the height of summer. This will stop plants from bolting.

**Potatoes:** The home-grown potatoes with the biggest difference in taste

Here are a few tips for care of some of the most popular vegetables suitable for growing in raised planters. They might form the main ingredients to your own five-a-day garden.



from supermarket spuds tend to be the earliest and salad varieties, rather than maincrops.

**Courgette:** Some flowers are female and some male; female ones will have a little fruit behind the flower, while the males have just a thin stalk. Try picking some of the male flowers and stuffing them with a cheesy breadcrumb mixture before frying. Water plants regularly to avoid mildew. Two courgette plants will crop all summer long and provide more than enough fruits.

**Salad leaves:** There are lots that grow well into autumn and some, like lamb's lettuce (corn salad), texel greens and oriental mustards will even grow through the winter. Protect winter salads from really bad frosts and snow.

**Broad beans:** You can enjoy a lovely early crop if you sow in the late autumn but protect from frosts otherwise there's a chance your precious plants will rot off.

**Runner beans:** Put the canes in with the seeds or young plants. Encourage twining by holding the stems and canes close with some pea rings.

**Peas:** Water regularly to avoid mildew. Gather twiggy sticks – up to about 1.2m (4ft) long and form a V-shaped arch with them in your planter. Peas grow by twining their tendrils around supports, making twiggy pea sticks preferable to smooth canes.

**Basil:** Delicious and easy to grow but tends to bolt quickly, so sow a few seeds every three weeks or so. Try making your own home-made pesto; it takes less basil than you'd think and will knock your socks off.

**Aubergines and peppers:** If you're in a chilly part of the country invest in a greenhouse cover or cloche to avoid the end-of-season disappointment of un-ripened fruit

**Companion plants:** Natural pairings can be beneficial. Sage wards off cabbage root fly, spring onions ward off slugs, but my favourite companion plant is the marigold. Said to ward off aphids, it also provides a brilliant splash of colour. Dot them throughout your planters.



Above left: Use pea rings to encourage twining. Right: Marigolds can help to avoid aphid problems.



**5** It's important each plant stays within its allocated space. Taller plants such as vine tomatoes will need to be staked and supported to stop them flopping over onto other crops.



**6** Raised planters will dry out quicker than the ground so take extra effort watering your crops. Six weeks after filling planters with compost it will be necessary to begin feeding them.

## Further information

- For crop grow guides visit this RHS website: [www.rhs.org.uk/Gardening/Grow-Your-Own/Veg-A-to-Z](http://www.rhs.org.uk/Gardening/Grow-Your-Own/Veg-A-to-Z)
- The planters used in this project are from the Burgon & Ball's Home Allotment range. Contact: 0114 2338262, [www.burgonandball.com](http://www.burgonandball.com)
- The 5-a-Day website has cropping charts, a garden planner and top tips to help you on your way to your own five-a-day garden: [www.5adaygarden.co.uk](http://www.5adaygarden.co.uk)