



Small plot solutions

If you have a small garden, the dream of growing your own may seem an impossible one. But at Hampton Court Flower Show last year we came across a great concept for a little plot which allows you to do just that. Its creator, **Heather Culpan** of quality tools and sundries supplier **Burgon & Ball**, has the details



The Burgon & Ball 5-a-day garden which won a gold medal at Hampton Court Flower Show.

The 5-a-day garden is a brilliant concept that allows you to pack a tremendous amount of veg plants into a tiny space. In fact, if you're particular with the veg you choose to grow, you could even grow enough fruit and veg to meet the 5-a-day guidelines for two people for a whole year, from just 10sq m (12sq yd) planting space.

The key to getting such vast yields is the 'deep bed method' – where plants are grown in deep loose compost. There's no soil compaction so the delicate roots can grow straight downwards instead of outwards allowing you to literally pack the plants in cheek by jowl.

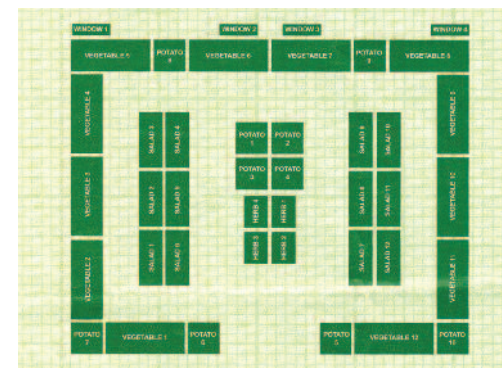


Deep beds or planters allow the roots of the plants to get down into the soil more easily and facilitate closer planting.

Getting your 5-a-day garden off the ground

You could create 'deep beds' by double digging patches of your garden and then never walking on those areas again. But it's a back-breaking job and you've got to be very disciplined to avoid treading on the soil over the years. Using planters gives you deep bed conditions in an instant. Plus, as your plants are growing off the ground, they're 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 thing to decide is where your new veg garden is going to go and the second is how much space you can give to it.



Draw up a plan before you begin to make the best use of space. You can find out more about this planting plan on www.5adaygarden.co.uk



Your plot should receive at least some sunshine during the day and if it can be near the house tending to it will be that much easier.

Siting your plot

Most crops will benefit from more sun rather than less and ideally your spot will be sheltered from prevailing winds. However don't despair if these conditions just aren't on hand – you might have to be a little more selective in what you choose to grow but there's still plenty of scope for success. I have had French beans, peas, mangetout and new potatoes growing very successfully on a wind exposed, elevated, partially shaded, north west facing deck and in fact nowhere in my garden gets sun for more than half of the day yet I've kept my family pretty well fed over the year.

Another thing to consider when siting your veg garden is that the nearer it is to the house the easier it is to look after... and the more contact you have with your veg the better your crops will be. I think this is one of the most important and underrated keys to success – just spending a couple of minutes a day visiting your veg garden will soon show 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 (not only are they heavy croppers but also because they grow vertically they take up relatively little surface planting area). However, 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 salad, veg and herbs. Then, if you're new to growing your own I'd suggest getting a good reference book or logging online to a website for veg specific info – I think the RHS has one of the easiest websites to follow, with a listing by veg (<http://www.rhs.org.uk/Gardening/Grow-Your-Own/Veg-A-to-Z>). Try to get a feel for how easy the crops are to grow – some such as courgettes need almost no attention, others such as cauliflowers are notoriously tricky. There are a few that I wouldn't particularly recommend for growing in containers – generally because they tend to grow very tall and need a firmer base in which to anchor their roots; these include sprouts and sweetcorn. In addition some crops, such as leeks, take a long time to mature – so if space is tight, you might want to consider whether you love them enough to dedicate space to them.

Also think about whether the plant will be a continuously cropping one or a single pick, in other



Start by only growing the things that you like to eat and which are expensive in the shops.



Strawberries thrive in planters too.

words will a plant keep on producing more and more edibles throughout the year (cut-and-come-again lettuce, kale, tomatoes, beans etc.) or will it spend its life reaching maturity and then need picking in one go (cabbage, hearting lettuce, carrots etc.)? The latter group are the ones that need more careful successional planting to avoid having a huge glut and then empty spaces.

Finally you need to work out a planting plan to shoehorn your crops into the space available.

Burgon & Ball Home Allotment Planters come sized to suit the requirements of different crops: Veg & Tomato, Salad, Potato and Herb (there's also a window box if space is really limited) – so pick your planter(s) according to your choice of crop. 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 5-a-day website www.5adaygarden.co.uk to see a similar planting chart – you may also find this helpful in looking at successional growing suggestions to maximize cropping throughout the year. The 5-a-day chart also has useful info on how many plants of each variety you can pack in per planter – you'll find it's much denser planting than the normal recommendations, in fact up to four times more dense for some veg (thanks to the deep bed conditions).



Get the most from your space by replanting empty containers as quickly as possible.

Young plants or seeds?

Watching things grow from seed is one of life's little joys and there are loads more seed varieties to choose from than are available as young plants. You will however have to resist the temptation to sow the whole packet at once; you need to sow a little every few weeks.

Some seeds can be sown straight into the planter, others will need bringing on in a seed tray – the packets will tell you which. Virtually all seeds (not coriander, carrots, parsnips) can be started off in a seed tray first on a sunny windowsill, greenhouse or propagator and you will get an earlier crop by doing this rather than planting straight into the planter.

There are lots of other veg that make lots of sense to buy as young plants and there are several advantages, including no risk of the plants not germinating and they tend to be sold in the right quantities for the small scale domestic grower, e.g. packs of six.



Watching things grow from seeds is one of life's little joys and gives you a wide choice of crop varieties.

What compost to use?

There are tonnes of different composts available, but personally I go for a John Innes based compost – these are soil (loam) based. I find them ideal for growing in raised beds because there is a greater tendency for them to dry out if you don't watch the watering well enough and a soil-based compost is more easily rewetted.

John Innes composts come with different numbers as their title – number three is my mainstay and what I use to fill my planters. If I'm sowing seeds straight into the planters I put a layer of No. 1 on the top (and also use this for sowing seeds into trays).

The numbers determine the amount and type of fertiliser in each mix with No.1 containing the least and No.3 the most.



Plants growing in containers need regular watering and feeding to thrive.

More on fertiliser and water

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 one. However the next two are very much within your control.

The fertiliser that is present when you fill your planter full of compost will sustain a plant for around six weeks. After that you need to start regularly feeding with added fertiliser to keep them growing and ripening fruits. Fruiting plants (tomatoes, peppers etc.) will need a different type of fertiliser to leafy ones (spinach, cabbage etc.). Check the packaging in the garden centre (I'm not generally a fan of the all-purpose veg fertiliser, I find it really does pay to get the right one for the plant).

Crops grown in planters will need more water than those grown in the ground, because there's no water table below them holding any inherent water in the soil. 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.

Companion planting

There are lots of suggestions for using natural plant pairings to provide a beneficial effect – sage to ward off cabbage root fly, spring onions to ward off slugs... my especial favourite companion plant is the marigold. Said to ward off aphids it also provides a brilliant splash of colour all summer long. I dot them throughout my planters and like the continuous colour thread it creates.



Flowers such as nasturtiums add colour and act as good companions, in this case to draw blackfly from your crops.

Special care and advice

Here are a few of my top tips for care of some of the most popular veg:

- **Tomatoes:** stake them securely and in the case of cordon varieties (those grown on a single stem) pinch out extra shoots that grow between the main stem and a leaf joint. Pay special attention to watering when the fruits have formed else you'll get tough or splitting skins. About four plants will fruit all summer long and provide a family with a good and constant supply of fruits.
- **Cabbage and kale:** cover them with a net against cabbage white butterfly.
- **Spinach:** if it's in a very sunny spot pick the planter and move to a partially shaded spot in the height of summer – stops the plants from bolting (shooting up and running to seed).
- **Potatoes:** the home-grown potatoes with the biggest difference in taste from the supermarket ones tend to be the first and second earlies and salad potatoes (rather than maincrop).
- **Salad leaves:** there are lots that will grow well in the autumn and some, like lamb's lettuce (corn salad), texel greens and oriental mustards will actually grow through the winter with protection only needed from really bad frosts/snow.



Compact varieties of tomatoes are great for pots



Sow broad beans in autumn for June cropping.

- **Courgettes:** some of the flowers will be female and some male. The female ones will have a little fruit behind the flower, the males will just be on a long thin stalk. Try picking some of the male flowers and stuffing them with a cheesy breadcrumb mixture before frying... delicious! Water regularly to avoid mildew. One or two courgette plants will crop all summer long and should provide a family with more than enough fruits.
- **Broad beans:** you can get a lovely early crop if you sow in the late autumn.
- **Runner beans:** put the canes in with the seeds or young plants, encourage twining with some wire rings or string.
- **Peas:** water regularly to avoid mildew. Peas grow by twining their tendrils around supports so supply twiggy sticks or netting for them to hold on to.
- **Basil:** totally delicious, dead 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 bit of the country, invest in a cloche to avoid the end of season disappointment of unripened fruit.



Woven planters are available from Burgon & Ball

- To find out more about Burgon & Ball's raised bed planters and the many other products in their extensive range visit www.burgonandball.com

The 5-a-day garden at Hampton Court 2011

Burgon & Ball will be introducing a new version of the 5-a-day garden at this year's Hampton Court Flower Show (July 5-10 2011). See it in our report on the show later in the year.

