



Balcony & Small Space Permaculture

Small spaces can be made highly productive using Permaculture principles. With an increasing number of city dwellers living in apartments with only a balcony or a small backyard, ideas of how to grow food in small spaces are constantly evolving and being shared. You will find in this fact sheet a few ideas to help you start a balcony or small garden and get into Permaculture.

Before you start

If you live in a strata titled building, it is recommended to consult with your Owners Corporation before you begin, to find out if there are regulations applying to your balcony. The weight of pots on a balcony or roof top needs to be taken into consideration and may need to be assessed. Also, keep in mind any drainage issue and water overflows.

Consider how you could use your vertical space using some of the below:

stackable pots	shelving
hanging pots	lattices
polypipe systems	wires
espaliered fruit trees	wall gardens

Design your space

Before you choose your plants or buy your pots, consider the conditions of the space such as aspect, wind, sun and shade. For example, north facing aspects usually get longer sun exposure, which allows plants that require full sun to thrive. If you're growing plants indoors, a north facing window will usually have more sunshine in winter and provide an opportunity for growing useful plants, as long as you don't let the soil dry out.

If your space is too windy, you can use climbing plants on trellis to dampen the wind. Remember that light surfaces such as walls can increase the light in a certain area. Likewise, a west facing dark brick wall can increase the ambient air temperature around it by a few degrees,

potentially burning heat sensitive plants in the summer or creating a warmer space for cold sensitive plants on winter evenings.

Tips on containers

There are a wide range of containers you could use:

water saving pots	stackable pots
old buckets	grow bags
garden wall systems	pots and saucers
plant boxes	styrofoam boxes
wooden crates	polypipe systems



Gardens on balconies may be exposed to a lot of wind which can dry out plants quickly. Self-watering pots are the best option since they keep enough water in their reservoir that plants can use over a number of days. A drip irrigation system can also make watering easier. Since large masses of soil take longer to dry, it is preferable to have a few large containers than lots of small containers requiring watering on a daily basis. Unglazed terracotta pots are porous and lose moisture very quickly, which makes them unsuitable for certain plants, if a yield is expected.



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Tips on soil

Buy an organic premium quality potting mix to fill your containers, or better, make your own potting mixes using a variety of ingredients such as homemade compost, worm castings, coco peat and vermiculite or perlite. Adding live worms to your pots will help to keep your soil aerated. Keep the soil fertile by using organic liquid fertilizers such as seaweed as well as compost tea or worm farm liquid runoff. Worm castings, organic pellets and rock dust are great ways of adding nutrients to your soil to keep it alive and help your plants to thrive.



A thick layer of mulch on top of your soil such as sugar cane mulch, coco peat or straw can help prevent evaporation from your soil, temperate the soil temperature, reduce the likelihood of weed growth and reduce the need for watering.

Try to find a space for a compost bin to make your own high quality compost: it can also be a great way to engage your neighbours in your gardening project if you have it in a shared space. No matter how small your space is, nearly everyone has room for at least a worm farm. The liquid runoff from worm farms makes an excellent organic soil and plant conditioner.

What to grow

Start with plants that grow easily, you like to eat and don't take up too much space. Generally, green leafy vegetables and herbs are easier to grow than fruit crops. Leaf crops can grow well in part shade, and you can harvest everything you grow. "Micro greens",

which are tender young seedlings of rocket, lettuce and other salad leaves, can be grown quickly in tiny spaces. If you have space for larger pots that has six hours or more of sunshine per day, you will be able to grow a wide range of plants suitable to your climate area and



the season. If you want to grow fruit trees, there are dwarf varieties that do well in pots. Keep in mind that climbing vegetables such as

cucumbers, beans, climbing spinach and peas can make efficient use of a vertical space. When grown on trellis, they can also serve as a wind break or dampen a hot afternoon sun on a dark brick wall.

Here are a few other tips:

- 🌱 Add a small pond to attract frogs, lizards and create biodiversity - remember to make it child safe by using a mesh or some other barrier.
- 🌱 If you have a little more room include small animals like worms, chickens, quails, or pigeons in your garden. The waste from these animals can be used as fertiliser for your plants. They will also recycle some of your leftovers and garden waste.
- 🌱 Harvest water where possible: you may be able to redirect the water from downpipes to your pots.
- 🌱 Include flowers in your garden to attract beneficial insects, and leave a few herbs or vegetables to flower. Generally, using 10% of your growing space for flowers and plants that attract predators and other beneficial insects is likely to benefit your whole garden.

And most important of all, make your garden a beautiful space so you enjoy spending time around it. Including a space to sit or have lunch in your garden can inspire you to harvest your own food to eat straight away, as well as to keep an eye on what's going on in your garden!



Permaculture Northern Beaches meets monthly at the Narrabeen Tramshed Pittwater Rd Narrabeen.

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You can also check out our web page:

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