Container Gardening Indoors

Wouldn't it be great to pick fresh vegetables from an indoor container garden in the middle of the winter? It's definitely possible, and the options are endless, requiring only a container, good growing conditions, and lots of care.

The containers used for indoor gardening must provide drainage and adequate room. An 8-12 inch diameter flower pot can be used for bush beans, beets, carrots, lettuce, onions, radishes, spinach, and Swiss chard. A tub or 2-5 gallon container can be used for bush type cucumbers, eggplant, peppers, bush summer or winter squash, tomatoes, and turnips.

For an indoor garden to grow well, attention must be paid to the basic growing requirements. When planting, use a peat-lite mix, containing equal proportions of peat and vermiculite or peat and perlite. Do not use soil from outdoors, as it will compact easily, inhibiting root growth, and may contain harmful fungus diseases.

Fertilize indoor plants with a all-purpose water soluble fertilizer for house plants (such as a 15-30-15 analysis), once every 2 weeks. Water when the soil surface feels dry to the touch.

Light is critical to growth. A south-facing window is best. Fruiting plants, in particular, require at least 12 hours of bright light, which may be difficult to obtain in the winter.

Annual flowers are more specific in their light requirements. Although most do best in a south window, it is the day length that is critical. Short day plants flower when there is only 10-12 hours of light and will not flower with excess light. Most annual flowers are long day plants that require at least 14, and preferably 18 hours of light to flower. These plants are best grown under a fluorescent light.

Indeterminate plants have minimal photoperiodic response. This category includes most vegetables. Most leafy and root crop vegetables prosper in cool temperatures. Highs of 60-65 degrees F. with lows at night ranging all the way down to 40 degrees F. are acceptable. Fruiting vegetables and most annual flowers require warm temperatures. For example, tomatoes will not set fruit unless nighttime temperatures are between 59-68 degrees F, with ideal daytime temperatures at about 80.

Vegetables suitable for indoor production include those that can be "mowed" to grow again like leaf lettuce, spinach, endive, and Swiss chard. Root crops such as radishes, baby carrots, and bunching onions also do well in container gardens. Beets and turnips are as valuable for their edible greens as their roots.

There are some disadvantages to growing vegetables indoors that counter their benefits. Vegetables take up a lot of space for the number of fruits they provide. Also, although bees pollinate the flowers outdoors, they are not common indoors. Indoors, the vegetables must be artificially pollinated for fruit development.

Pollination can be accomplished by taking the powdery pollen from the bead-like anthers with a camel's hair brush and placing it upon the stalk-like pistil. Good fruiting vegetables for indoors include squash, cherry tomatoes, bush cucumbers, and snap beans.