

Growing a Balcony Bounty

by Jonathon Walsh

Getting started in gardening doesn't have to be difficult in fact it can be as easy as opening a door and stepping out onto your balcony. Balconies are great places to start growing food and in this article we will look at just how easy that is by discovering some simple and creative ways to grow food at home.

We'll also find out what kinds of food we can grow on a balcony, 13 different ways we can do so, and how to make a raised garden – an ideal way to grow a broad range of food – including larger vegetables – on a balcony.

Balcony bounty – getting started

There are many good reasons to transform a balcony into a garden paradise. Growing plants there can make your balcony not just look beautiful but smell great, become a convenient food source (just step outside), use space that is not being utilized (walls), save money (reduce grocery bills), and ensure food is safer and healthier (no chemicals).

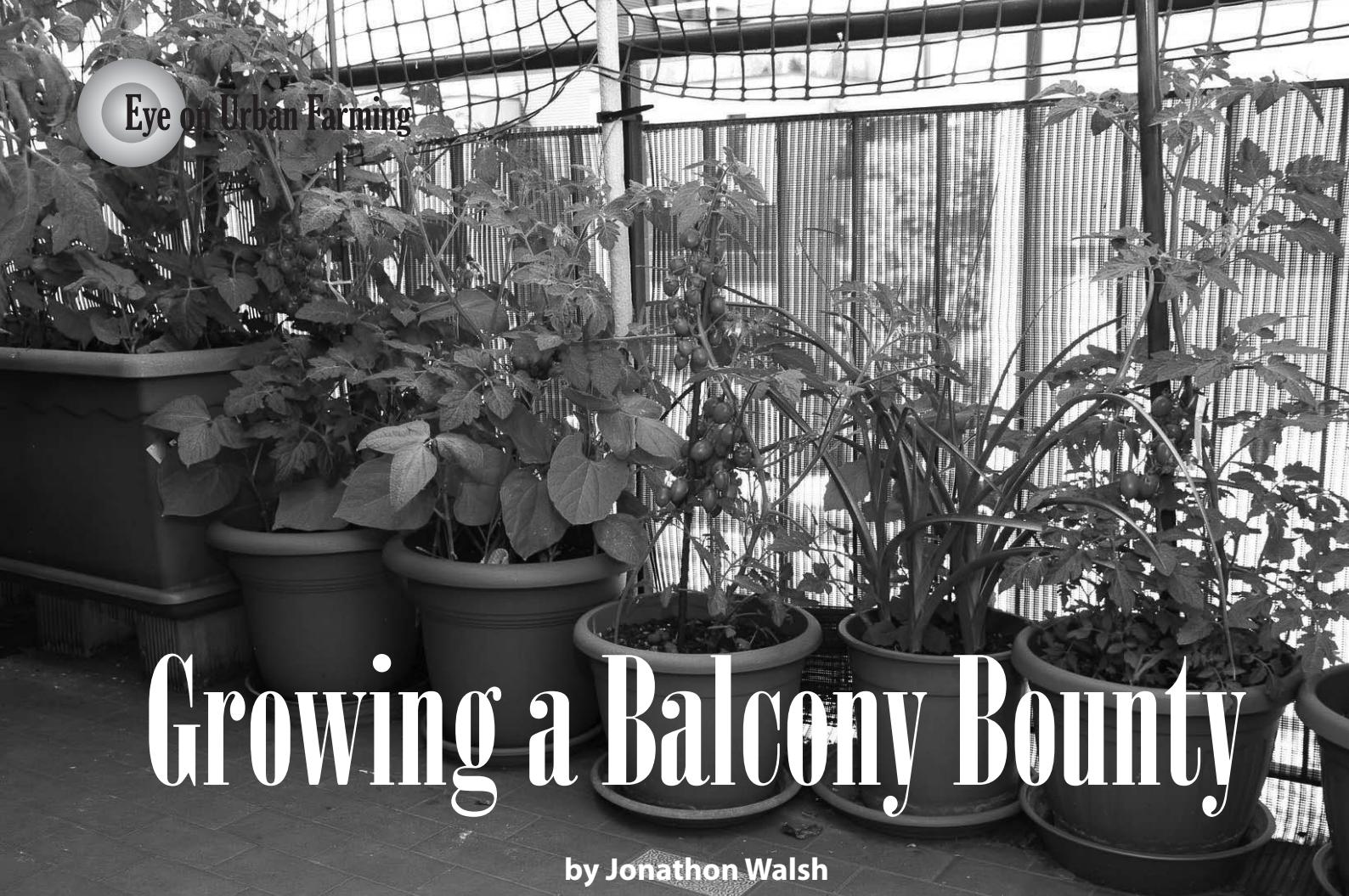
Also, depending on the direction a balcony is facing, they

will often receive more sunshine than the ground, and, due to their elevation, will be out of reach of snails, slugs and many other hungry creatures that will love dining on your plants.

However, before doing anything, it is crucial that you check roughly how many hours of direct sunshine your balcony receives. A minimum of 2-3 hours should be sufficient to grow a tasty range of vegetables.

Next.....

- Look around the balcony and consider where and how planting containers could be arranged.
- If the outer or end walls are blocking sunlight, consider placing planting containers on tables, ladders, or other raised platforms to maximize their exposure to sunlight.
- Consider not just quantity but also aesthetic properties, ie: will my balcony not only be functional as a garden but also be attractive to look at?
- Be conscious of weight – It is advisable to minimize overall load (especially as soil becomes heavier when wet), so look



for light containers and soil when purchasing equipment.

- To make your balcony actually look like a garden, consider laying some artificial turf squares or a turf mat on the floor.

What are the best crops to grow on balconies? These will of course depend on the season: in spring, almost any vegetable will grow with suitable sunlight including tomatoes, cucumbers and eggplants, potatoes (grow these in a tub or bucket), beans, salad greens (spinach, mizuna, komatsuna, rocket, mustard leaf, etc.), carrots, radishes, chard, spinach and herbs (mint, parsley, basil, coriander, etc.)

In autumn, baby leaves, broccoli, burdock root, cabbage, Chinese cabbage, Bok choi, daikon, mizuna, lettuce, onion, radish, rocket, shiso, shungiku, spinach, turnip, parsley, and others can be planted.

These plants are relatively easy to grow, and if you don't use any chemicals or artificial sprays, they will taste great and be far healthier than regular supermarket food. You can grow all of the above from seeds, however, if you want to eat them sooner, look for seedlings in home stores, plant shops and supermarkets. In general, anything that produces fruit prefers sun, and anything that produces edible leaves will be okay with some shade.

13 ways to grow food on balconies

Let's now look at different ways food can be grown on balconies. It is important to note that all containers used to grow vegetables should have water drainage holes punched in their bottoms.

For those who want to recycle and be mindful of the planet, used cups, cans or other containers can easily be turned into food growing equipment.

Alternatively, larger objects such as plastic drawers from a filing cabinet could be recycled.

[HOW: Punch holes in the bottom, cover them with a thin layer of pot stones, add soil and sow seeds.] Crates can also be recycled into stationary or portable growing containers.



Grow bags, which can be easily made out of an eco bag, are very convenient as they are lightweight and can be moved around easily. [METHOD: Simply line the inside of an eco bag with a plastic bag (fold to fit if necessary), punch holes at the bottom (in the plastic bag and in the bottom of the eco bag), add soil and sow seeds or plant seedlings.]

Grow bags are ideal for larger plants including lettuces, cucumbers, basil, potatoes, beans, tomatoes, carrots, and virtually any green leafy vegetable.



For those who want to experiment with layout and placement, why not use a collection of identically shaped pots or containers to grow food in? These can be arranged both on the flat and upward to create eye-catching mini gardens.



Then, of course, there are standard planting containers such as flower pots, planter boxes (small **and** large), and planter buckets.



If you want to grow upward, why not set up a GroRack or use a ladder? A GroRack is simply a shelving unit positioned on the balcony that has planter boxes on it. A ladder takes advantage of both angle and elevation to expose plants to sunlight.

Lightweight greenhouses comprised of a steel frame enclosed in a plastic cover are another smart way to grow food on a balcony while also keeping pests at bay.



Raised gardens

Urban farmers with more space and slightly larger ambitions might be inclined to try installing a raised garden. Think of a raised garden as a block of garden soil – enclosed

by four planks – that contains a greater volume of soil than regular planting containers to enable you to grow more food.

A key benefit of raised gardens is that they can be positioned virtually anywhere, including on concrete, stone, asphalt, dead soil or any other flat surface around, on or next to your residence. Also, they are one of the easiest ways to start growing larger amounts of food in virtually any sunlit location.

A good size to make a raised garden is 1 x 1 meter, and they should be at least 15 cm deep to maximize the range of vegetables you can grow.



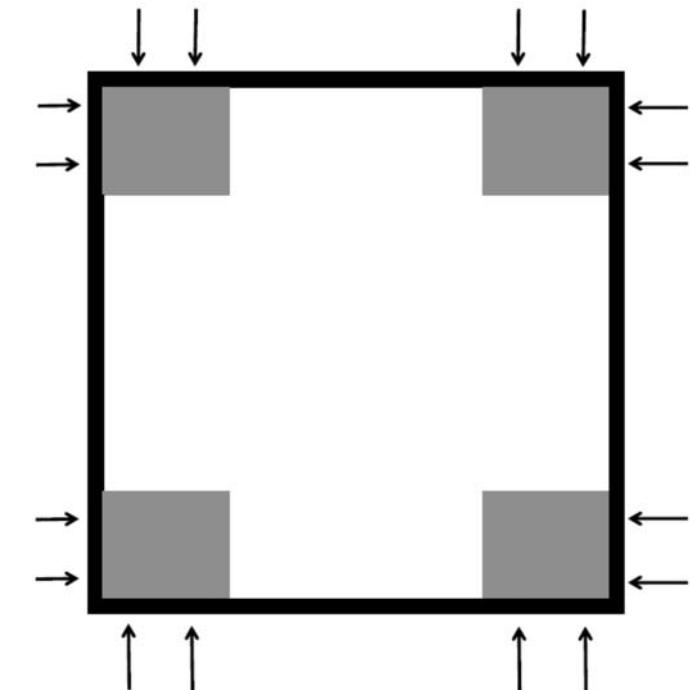
What crops can be grown in a 15-cm deep raised garden? Lettuce and other salad vegetables, strawberries, green beans/runner beans, onions, oriental greens: (mizuna, komatsuna, pak choi, etc.), peas, radishes, spinach, herbs (basil, chives, coriander, oregano, mint, thyme, etc.), flowers, and much more.

Before starting to build a raised garden, in particular if you are doing so on a balcony, be sure to note the following points:

- Make sure that water can drain away to a drain – which your balcony should have.
- If possible use light soil to minimize load.

How to build a raised garden

1. Determine where you will put the raised garden. Choose a safe, sturdy location that receives optimum sunlight.
2. Lay 4 identically sized planks in a square formation and join their corners by either nailing or screwing the ends of each plant into four corner blocks.
3. Lay a large plastic sheet or similar material into the bottom of the frame so that it also covers the inner faces of the planks. Fold to fit.
4. Cut holes in the bottom of the sheet for water drainage.
5. Add a layer of pot stones or similar material to cover the bottom (this aids drainage).
6. Fill the frame with general purpose soil to approximately 2-3 cm below the top edge of the frame.
7. Level the soil so that it is flat.
8. Sprinkle seeds evenly onto the soil and/or transplant seedlings.
9. Cover the seeds with approximately 1 cm of soil.
10. Write the names of the seeds on plant label sticks and insert into the soil.
11. Water the soil daily to ensure the soil does not dry out.



Balcony gardening can be a fun and learning experience for the whole family, especially when you see your salads growing right outside your door. Dig in! ♥