



Greetings GreenFriends!

Welcome to the Spring 2020 GreenFriends newsletter! In this edition, we will focus on gardening in the time of the pandemic.

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This is a challenging time. For most of us, being required to stay at home brings both angst and opportunity. At much of the world has had the pause button pushed, we are required to examine not only how we spend our time, but also that we suddenly have time to do things we may have often wanted to do, but couldn't get around to - like having a garden for instance. Amma says we should be planting trees and growing gardens as some of the many way to show respect for, and honor towards, nature.

But where to begin? For a lot is us, garden space is at a premium. And how should we get started with a vegetable or flower garden if we have never tried it before? In this edition of the GreenFriends newsletter, we share a number of ideas of how to make the best use of garden space both outdoors and indoors. Handy advice on watering, sprouting, growing flowers, irrigating and learning how to share a garden with wild animals (pigeons in this case).

We also invite all of you Green Friends to share your ideas and experiences with your own gardening efforts.

"Man is dependent on Nature for his very existence. Nature is an indispensable part of life on earth. Without Nature no creature, not man or anything else, can live. Therefore, it is one of our foremost duties to lovingly care for all living things." – Amma

GROWING VEGETABLES IN SMALL SPACES

Tips from MA Center in San Ramon



In the wake of today's plight - namely the confluence of the COVID-19 virus, environmental issues, and widespread poverty - growing healthy, organic food has become a critical priority for families and communities around the world. Even in the smallest of spaces, there are ways to grow intensively and organically. Doing so not only directly benefits us and our families, but any surplus produce can be shared with those less fortunate in our communities. This contributes to building a kinder and more compassionate world - a world that prioritizes sharing over hoarding.

There are practicalities and benefits specific to growing food in small spaces. The general rule of thumb is 100 square feet of garden space grows enough fresh food for one person, for one season. However, using the principles of square foot gardening, that can be reduced to 16 square feet per person, or 1.5 square meters!

If you only have a little space available and want to expand and intensify your existing growing area, you can look at combining "square foot gardening" principles, gardening in pots, vertical gardens, arbors and trellises.

Outlined in this article are three main small space gardening techniques:

1. Square foot gardening
2. Vertical gardening
3. Tower gardening

Square Foot Gardening

Some advantages of square foot gardens (SFGs) include:

You can grow as much food as possible within a small space

- A 4ft x 4ft raised bed provides ease of access
- Beds can be constructed to grow food on a patio or a small yard
- SFGs are easy to maintain as the closely planted beds will crowd out weeds, and the raised bed allows for physical ease in gardening
- SFGs are not damaging to a yard, as they are not permanent structures
- SFGs are perfect for a beginner gardener, as they are extremely easy to manage

You start by building a 4ft x 4ft raised bed and divide it into 16 even squares (1 square = 1ft x 1ft). You can use string or wooden dowels to divide the squares.

When planting crops, keep in mind the size of the mature plant. Space accordingly using intensive plant spacing principles. Examples of these spacing principles include:

- 1 tomato plant per square
- 4 spinach plants per square
- 8 bean plants per square
- 16 carrot or radish plants per square

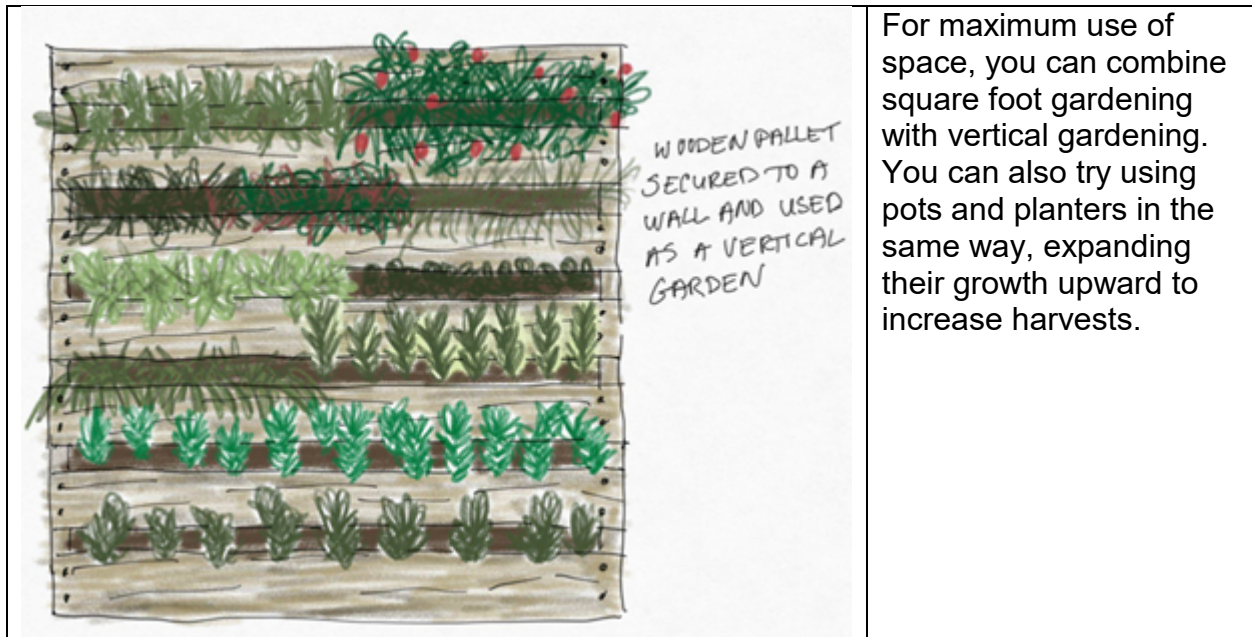
Crop rotation and adding sufficient compost becomes important in SFG, as you plant to ensure the soil is not depleted. Add trellises to grow vining vegetables upwards and increase their growing potential.

Verticle Gardening

Vertical gardening can be a useful standalone method to grow food in particularly small spaces. There are many ways this can be achieved using readily available materials. Some examples of vertical gardens are:

- Use planters mounted on a wall or shelving structure
- Use planters on the ground with posts or trellises to encourage upward growth
- Build a pallet wall garden.

When using planters mounted on a wall, careful attention needs to be taken in regards to the weight of the structure and ensuring it is fully secured.



Tower Gardening

An incredibly efficient use of space and resources, tower gardens allow for intensive growth using a very small footprint, and their construction allows for reduced water evaporation. Some advantages of tower gardens include:

- Tower gardens allow for high density yield per area
- They are good for small sunny places like balconies, patios and rooftops
- They facilitate year-round production indoors
- They often provide more than 90% efficiency in water use

Building a do-it-yourself tower garden can be a creative project, utilizing materials you may already have on hand. These can be erected vertically or horizontally.



TEMPERATURE AND WATERING TIPS FOR PLANTING



Temperature - Day Time Versus Night Time

Plants enjoy similar temperatures to humans. If you want to put your indoor plants out on warm sunny days. Please, put them out above 50 degrees and bring them back in as temperatures head down below 50. Also a sunny window inside is like shade outside. Your plants will get sunburnt if you put them out in direct sun all day. Start with a few hours in the morning sun and ease into a full day of sun over a two-week period. You can also do this for seedlings to grow them strong and sturdy. Set a timer so you don't forget them!



Plants That Don't Mind Cool Weather (Plant now)

- Peas (plant first)
- Onions
- Lettuce/Spinach (salad greens)
- Radish
- Nasturtium
- Petunias (not all varieties)
- Potatoes

Cool Weather Veggies

Plant peas, lettuce, spinach, onion, radish, white potato, as early as the frost is out of the ground. When the soil temps get into the 50's the roots will start active growth.

After St. Patrick's Day is the when to start (at least in the North East). Plant some of your seeds once a week for a month, to be sure you get something. Weather is so variable now it is hard to know when plants can be started.



Plants That Need Above 50 Degrees at Night

- All squash (Cucumber, Zucchini, Pumpkin)
- All tomatoes
- Okra, Eggplant
- Peppers
- Tropicals



Warm Weather Plants

- Okra
- Sweet potato
- Squash (like cucumber, zucchini, butternut)
- Beans
- Zinnia

These all must have night temperatures in the 50's. Tomato plants will loose their blossoms below 50 degrees. (No blossom = no fruit). Late May early June is best for planting these plants. If you want to start seeds inside wait until May and start under lights or put them outside in the south sun in a protected spot during the day until the night temperatures warm.

Consistency is Key for Containers

Water Wise

- Clouds outside - water the soil - starter plants can dry out even when it's cloudy. It takes a few weeks for their roots to grow outside the ball of roots you plant them with
- Hot sunny day - water the soil
- Water well when you water - make sure you water the soil that has the roots the plant came with when watering your new plants
- Water doesn't travel side to side in a pot so water all around the base of the plant
- Cold rainy day - don't water- just like you they don't like cold wet feet!



Plants Like What You Like

They like to be cozy, warm, well fed, well watered, and loved by all...

INDOOR GARDENING GUIDE – 6 STEPS TO GROWING VEGETABLES INDOORS



(Lemonbalm started in a pot)

Amma has recommended we try to grow our own fruits and vegetables. For those who have a backyard or a patio to garden, you already have a grow space. That's so great! If your outside space does not get any sun, or you want or need to grow indoors for any reason (like me, without a patio/garden space), you can, too! It may take a small investment upfront, but you can have fresh vegetables without going to the store - and also following our Amma's wishes as things are complicated due to coronavirus.

I do not know about others, but as somebody who has not grown much on my own before, I was hesitant to start, especially with an indoor garden. But with some effort and Grace, it does not seem as hard anymore. If I can do it in my small apartment with not much light, I believe you can also make it happen. I am also learning as I go. Right now, I have one set of herbs (lemon balm) and kale started, and I am starting a few more vegetables in the next two weeks.

The below guides are a result of my research and advice from experienced gardeners. I recommend maybe starting out with 1-3 herbs or vegetables you want to use; start slow, learn, and build up. Lettuce seems to be a simple vegetable to start with.

Please remember to try and buy, use, and conserve heirloom seeds. Organic, if possible. Amma recommended this in Summer 2019 in a retreat at Santa Fe, at the end of the Q&A session.

All love and happy learning and growing adventures!

Step 1: Pick Your Target Plants and Procure Seeds

Many plants can be grown indoors with the right temperature, humidity and light conditions. While altering temperature can be trickier, you can modify light and humidity using grow lights or an inexpensive humidifier. If you are growing produce indoors to eat on a regular basis, maybe it would be best to pick seeds that are higher yield, easy to raise, and meet your indoor temperature conditions.

Lettuce is a good plant to have around because it can be continuously harvested and does not require a lot of sun or soil. Although it is a cooler weather plant (preferring 60 - 70°F conditions), there are some varieties of loose leaf lettuce, such as Bibb, that can grow in temperatures up to 80°F.

Research the needs of your plants as you decide what to plant, and see if they suit your home. For instance, if you want to plant beans, know that you need to buy a trellis to help support the creeper as it grows. You can also start some herbs in small pots. We have lemon balm, rosemary and thyme growing.



(Kale sprouts)

If you want to follow our simple indoor vegetable garden, we picked lettuce, kale, Parisian carrots (which are short spherical carrots) and bell peppers for this first foray. I would stay away from microgreens for now, because you'd have to keep buying seeds to eat - and those seeds seem to be in short supply online.

When you grow your own full-sized plant, however, you can help it bolt or go to seed and produce more seeds for the next grow cycle.

In terms of how to buy seeds to plant, you can buy heirloom seeds online. There are a few sites, one of which is a non-profit named [Seed Savers](#) that sell them. Some of these heirloom seeds are even USDA organic. Alternatively, you can ask your nearby garden/home improvement store or wellness supermarkets if they carry seeds.

Step 2: Decide on your Planters

Each vegetable or fruit you grow will have an ideal soil depth to accommodate its roots once grown. Research the needed depth and buy or fashion a planter that meets that depth. Do not use a deeper-than-necessary planter, as it will just take up more soil, which can be expensive.

In terms of the types of planters one can buy, there are:

- Grow bags that are relatively inexpensive (look for food-safe plastic or cloth lined with food-safe plastic)
- Window planters (be sure to look for ones with saucers)
- Plastic buckets,
- Raised beds of different kinds, including self-watering raised beds
- Tiered growing systems (such as pots that stack atop one another, a hanging pocket grow system or a tiered shelving unit that can be attached to the wall)

Consider what your space can accommodate. For our home, I have chosen grow bags split into four sections and some large plastic pots. Make sure there are holes for drainage in your planters (you can always make some holes by drilling them in).

You can also fashion planters out of items you may have around the house. Depending on the soil depth needed, you can look for milk crates, old trays of the right depth, Tupperware, grocery bags, drawer organizers, cardboard boxes even. If you go with cardboard, to prevent it from becoming soggy when watering, you can double layer boxes or add a burlap sack inside, add holes for drainage, and maybe some rocks in the bottom.

Another idea is to use the bag of soil you get as a planter - just punch holes in the bag and plant your seeds. This method seems a little trickier, so I would not recommend - but you can do your own research and decide! Once you have decided on your plants and planter, you can move to the next step!

Do "start small" with just a few vegetables, if this is your first time growing. You can even start with just lettuce, as suggested.

Step 3: Procure Soil, Fertilizer and Grow Lights

For indoor gardening, buy a good, ideally organic indoor/container garden potting mix. Be careful not to buy potting soil, or soil meant for outdoor gardens. Be sure to look around online or in home improvement stores for the kind you prefer; read some recent reviews and also find something that meets your budget. Also, at the same time, look for an all-purpose organic fertilizer for indoor vegetables (a 1:1:1 NPK [Nitrogen, Phosphorus Potassium] ratio seems appropriate) and consider looking for some high quality compost for compost tea.

You can call facilities that offer composting services near you to ask how to buy their finished compost. Alternatively, you can buy compost from a home improvement store or online retailer. Compost and fertilizer are not the same thing; compost is used to replenish the soil, while fertilizer is used to feed the plants. If you want to pick just one for now, pick fertilizer - you can add compost later to revitalize your soil (see step 6).

If you do go with just fertilizer, try to find one with beneficial microorganisms in it. Do fertilizer near the root zone of a plant, so the benefits can soak down into the roots.

If you are growing your plants indoors in a shadier area, you may want to consider a grow light, or grow lights. Plants need the right kind of light and right amount; grow lights can supplement the indoor light we have. Without enough light, your plants may grow weakly and become "leggy".

Grow bulbs or grow lights have the right frequencies of light for a plant. You don't have to invest in the purple/red grow lights - you can find grow lights that emit regular-looking light but have the frequencies your plants need. We purchased a LED grow light bulb that can fit into a lamp we have; we are using this as a grow light, as it seems ecofriendly (bulbs can be replaced/recycled). It was also budget-friendly.

To get specific, grow lights with mostly red spectrum are good for plants you want to flower or fruit (tomatoes, peppers, strawberries). If you were to start with just the one light, you can buy a balanced spectrum light that work for both leafy greens and fruiting plants. An alternative to buying specifically tagged grow lights is to use a combination of "cool white" and "daylight" LED lights.

You may also consider purchasing a soil pH/light/moisture meter so you can assess the growing conditions to remedy any issues. You may also consider buying a grow light timer so you can ensure that your plants receive the right amount of light and darkness for growth (each plant has different likes and dislikes). Or you could wing it without these tools and see if you need them later.

Step 4: Grow the Plants!

There is some debate about how to plant seeds. Some suggest germination in "seed starting mix" and then transplanting the germinated plants to a bigger pot. This seems to yield better results for some. However, I wanted a simpler alternative, so I just went with direct sow for my herbs and for my kale plants.

Direct sow seems to be working for them. In any case, sow the seeds in your planters according to instructions and water accordingly.

Lights should be as close to the soil as possible for starting seeds.

Wait, and soon your seeds will sprout! Fertilize about once every two weeks and check the soil conditions from time to time, to ensure it meets your plants' needs. Water as instructed by the seed's growing guide. Incrementally raise up the grow lights as the plants grow to keep them directly over the leaves.

There is one method of planting you may want to investigate: succession planting. Radishes, for instance, are a "one and done" vegetable. When you harvest the radishes, almost nothing is left behind for future growth. In order to ensure a consistent harvest of radishes, consider planting your seeds at week-long increments, so you can enjoy radishes consistently.

Carrots and potatoes also fall into the same category as radishes. Lettuce, on the other hand, you can harvest consistently, if you harvest the right way, however; you can still plant a lettuce seeds a few weeks apart in order to ensure a consistent harvest.

Step 5: Harvest!

Look online and ensure you harvest your vegetables the right way for your needs. For lettuce, you can trim the outer leaves and allow leaves to grow back, for a continuously growing plant. Or, if you have succession planted, you could harvest the whole lettuce head. Treat this first foray as a learning experience; if there are any issues, diagnose and try again!

Step 6: Soil Replenishment, Rest and Rotation

Soil feeds our plants and can get depleted with time. Different kinds of plants take up and add in different nutrients to the soil. To help soil rest and replenish, after we have harvested a plant completely, we should remove any excess plant matter (such as roots), turn the soil (bring the bottom soil to the top, essentially, mixing it all up), and blend in compost or plant food.

Finally, consider crop rotation. Crop rotation is a method that has been used for centuries, wherein you rotate crop from different families (legume, root, leaf, and fruit) so that the soil does not get too depleted of any one kind of nutrient. Consider changing what is in each pot from year to year, following a crop rotation schedule.

GROWING FLOWERS IN POTS



As we know, every green leaf holds carbon that could be in the atmosphere. Those green leaves can also fuel the abundant flowers that we all enjoy. Without large garden areas and the time needed to tend them, growing flowering plants in pots is a fun alternative.

It can be easier than you think. Planting flowers well suited for your situation can bring you success! Flowers (just like you) are happy doing their job if you provide the environment they need. Soil, light, temperature, and water are the variables to assess. Plant according to your circumstances. If you have a hot, sunny deck with plenty of water, you have lots of choices. Petunias, Geranium, Ageratum, Angelonia, tropicals like Hibiscus and Diplodena come to mind. If you have a shady area that's bright, then Impatiens, Thunbergia, and non-stop begonias are good choices.



How to Begin

As you have your own pots, choose plants that you enjoy that will work in the environment you have. Soil volume is important. During the warm growing season it is hard to overwater your containers. It is easy to let them get too dry between waterings. If you know that you tend to forget or not have time to water often choose larger containers for your plants. This gives the plant a more forgiving environment to thrive in. When choosing a container larger is better so size up if you're not sure.

Selecting Flowers

When starting from seed, choose plants that are Dwarf or shorter in stature. For example the Magellan series zinnia is well suited for pots, whereas the Benary giant would do better in the ground.

I always look at the height listed on the package. Less than 2 feet tall is a good rule of thumb. When you buy flowers already started try to select those that have buds coming rather than those in full bloom. They will adjust to the stress of transplanting more easily and will give you the show they were grown for. Check that their light requirements match your growing spot.

Soil and Fertilizer

Finding good soil is always a challenge. I prefer a lighter soil. If the bag says for indoor or out it's probably not a great soil. Soil with fertilizer is generally milled bark mulch with a fertilizer charge, so I avoid those. It is better to select an organic fertilizer to add to a good sterile soil mix.

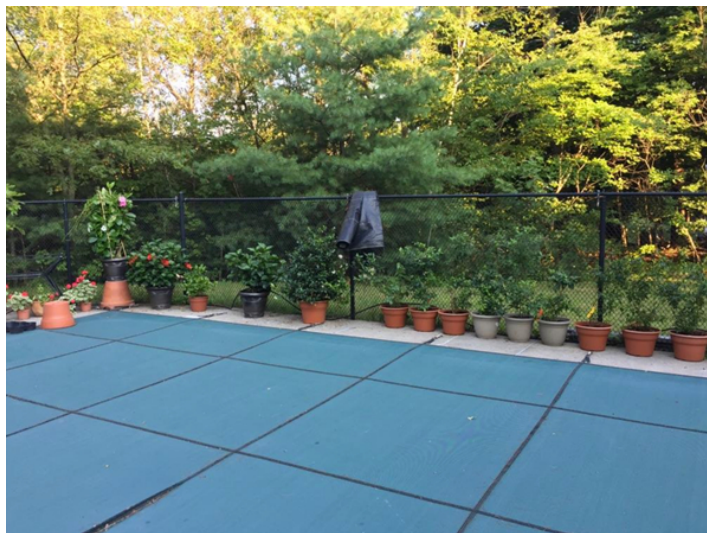
Look for a fertilizer that has biology. It will say that it has microorganisms or beneficial bacteria. These microorganisms attach to the root hairs of the plant and regulate the food and moisture for the plant. Fertilizing lightly once a week is better than heavier less often.

Planting

First fill the pots two-thirds full of organic potting soil that is somewhat moist. It should not clump and be too wet when gently squeezed also not fly away dry. Mix the organic fertilizer in the top 2 inches of soil so that it will be available to the roots as they come in contact with that soil.

Gently nestle the soil around the plant after you have put the new plant in the pot. Don't over compact. Make sure the soil is even and in contact with the new root ball. if the root ball is just roots going round and round the pot it's good to take the clippers and snip them near the bottom of the plant in 4 or five places to help them break out of the root ball.

The top of the soil in the pot should end up even with the top of the soil of the plant. When planting more than one plant in a pot, leave space for them to grow. Also, turn the plants so that the nicest side of the plant faces the 'front' of the pot. Doing that makes it look terrific immediately.



(Pots ready to water)

Caring for your Flower Pots

Your pots are planted now. "Water them in" using a watering can with a diffuser or a hose with a diffuser is best. Water thoroughly the soil all around the top of the pot. You may have to do this a few times during the first watering to get the soil evenly moist. Water does not travel side to side in a pot so it is important to go all the way around. This settles the soil to create contact with the roots.

When the plants are new and the temperatures are cooler, watering will be needed less often. As the plants grow and the temperatures warm, you will gradually increase the watering frequency. In August, every day may be the norm.

Water well when you water. How long you wait between watering depends on the temperature and how big the plant has gotten.

If the pot gets overly dry, the soil tends to pull away from the sides of the pot. In that case when you water, the water goes around the root ball and right out the bottom giving you a false notion the plant has had enough. If this happens put a two inch or more saucer under the pot and fill with water, and add more until it stops drinking. Once your flowers have faded, you will want to remove the spent blossoms to encourage new ones.

CLAY POT IRRIGATION



(Custom-made olla pots ready for burying)

Speaking of pots, some Green Friends in the San Francisco area are finding creative ways to deal with drought - another side effect of climate change. It is a continuing imperative to try to conserve water, while increasing the efficiency and yield of our home gardens. This is true throughout the world. Fortunately, we can turn to an age-old method that is guaranteed to give us a level of conservation while improving yields in the garden.

Buried clay pot irrigation or "ollas", which is Spanish for pots, is a clever invention that has proven to increase productivity and significantly decrease water consumption for over 4,000 years around the globe, including India, Africa, China and the Americas. Recent comparative studies conducted in Zambia by the University of Pretoria demonstrated significant improvement in crop size and quality, while greatly reducing water consumption by 70%. In some cases using ollas was just as effective as surface irrigation.

Here in the US, master gardeners in Arizona and New Mexico boast almost 90% water conservation with olla irrigation. At our vegetable farm at MA Center San Ramon, we decided to experiment with ollas during the 2019 growing season, and our findings were equally astonishing.

Method

We applied the ollas method to two of our garden rows, namely tomatoes and peppers, while the rest of the field was irrigated with mulched drip irrigation. We irrigated twice a

week. On several occasions prior to irrigating, we inserted a dry stick into a few ollas to assess water level.

Additionally, although we mulched heavily with straw in order to reduce weed growth, studies show that irrigating deep underground at the root level greatly reduces weed proliferation, leaving you to spend less time weeding and more time enjoying the garden.

Results

When we checked five days after their last filling, most often, the ollas still had over 50% of their water— in the heat of the California summer! The two beds with ollas produced just under 400 lbs. of tomatoes and peppers that were sweet and juicy, whereas the beds without ollas consistently struggled to deliver. The best yield for a bed using drip irrigation was the potato bed, producing only 115 lbs.. When we completed our data collection on water consumption, the rows with ollas used 88% less water than drip irrigation!



(Olla in the ground with saucer lid and drip line feeding it)

Do-It-Yourself

Do-it-yourself ollas are easy to make, using a couple of unglazed terracotta flower pots, some water-based silicone caulk and a little duct tape. Here are the steps:

- Simply plug the hole on one pot with duct tape on the outside
- Seal up the inside of that hole with silicone caulk
- Add a band of caulk along the rim of the pot
- Place another pot over the caulked one, rim-to-rim
- Twist a little to ensure there are no air bubbles in the caulk
- Finally, wipe off the excess with a damp cloth

Allow the pot to dry for 24 hours and you have your first olla ready to go in the garden!

Make sure you bury the pot leaving no more than an inch exposed, and cover the hole with a clay pot saucer or a stone. Due to the fact that our vegetable farm here at the San Ramon ashram is fairly large, we have drip lines set up to fill the pots; however, the pots can be easily filled by hand in smaller gardens.

We are planning on hosting some gardening workshops in 2020 at MA Center San Ramon once the current social restrictions are lifted, to provide guidance on how to implement this time-tested method into a home garden.



(A sample do-it-yourself Olla)

SPROUTS IN NORTH AMERICA



Recently, I have seen posts on social media from various devotees on growing plants from seeds or cuttings. Seeing their efforts and progress, I was inspired to try it out for myself.

In the past, I had a garden plot and space to grow vegetables. I usually grew vegetables from store-bought seedlings. Now, I live in an apartment with a balcony. While I do not have access to a plot of land, I do have some space and a few hours of sunlight to grow plants. Last year, I grew kale in a planter and it was nice to be able to pick leaves for meals on a regular basis. The kale did "bolt" once it got too warm as it is a cold weather plant. Bolting is a process where a central stalk will grow taller than the leaves and then produce flowers. If this happens, the leaves might get tough. Best to pick the leaves before the plant bolts.

I put a handful of mung beans on some cotton that I obtained from the inside of a supplement bottle. I covered the beans and cotton with a dark cover. Within 24 - 36 hours, the beans sprouted. Two weeks later and they had grown 6 - 8 inches long. Not

all the seeds sprouted at the same time. I had to keep the cotton moist but made sure not to over water as I didn't want them to rot. I will be planting the seedlings in soil soon. I read that mung beans grow deep roots, so I will be planting them in a tall container.

If you grow seedlings indoors, you may want to gradually "harden" them before planting them outside or exposing them to long hours of direct sunlight. If possible, the first time outside, I choose a non-windy day to put them in the shade. Then, the second day, I move them to a sunny spot for a few hours in early morning or late afternoon sunlight. I usually transplant them on the third day.

Based on the research, mung beans will eventually produce clusters of pods which take approximately 90 days to mature. The pods look like thin pea pods and contain mung beans inside. I am excited to see how they come out!

I have also seen posts about re-growing vegetables from cuttings. It seems you can grow many vegetables/herbs/roots from cuttings. In the photo above, you will see the base of scallions I put in water 4 days ago. I had cut the scallions straight across. The outer-most ring shows the length at which the scallions were cut. The 3 - 4 inches above the outer ring grew in the past 4 days simply from having the roots in water.

It seems you can re-grow bok choy, onions, celery and some herbs this way. Possibly even carrots from the tops! Don't be afraid to experiment. Enjoy and good luck!

- *An urban-dwelling 'farmer' from Boston*

GARDENING WITH WILD PIGEONS



A few years back, inspired by Amma's inDeed Campaign for Nature, we started planting vegetables indoors and on the balcony. My first year I grew some amazing baby kale that was quickly consumed by aphids and caterpillars. At least someone enjoyed it.

The growing season is short in Canada, so eventually we started planting seeds indoors using recycled clear plastic containers that act like a mini greenhouse. We'd then move the seedlings outdoors when the spring temperatures were high enough. In the summer, our balcony is covered in recycled pots and buckets, full of growing veggies.

The harvest is small but satisfying. We've learned that chili pepper plants are beautiful, bountiful, and quite resistant to insects. We don't eat hot peppers, but can usually find enough people to gift them to. Cherry tomatoes were great one year, but had a much smaller yield the next, so we learned to rotate crops and plant something different in that soil the next year. Chives are another resilient plant that just grow back automatically next year with next to no effort.



(Recycled plastic greenhouse)

Last year our balcony garden reached its highest peak. We grew a single cob of corn, lettuce and arugula (enough to make one salad!), a few sweet red peppers, lots of basil (enough for a few batches of pesto), a carrot, a sweet potato, a good amount of green peas and tomatoes, three tiny strawberries, asparagus, green onions, and plenty of flowers.

Every year is a new experiment. We've mostly learned to enjoy the journey and not be too attached to the results. This year, in the early spring, before we started planting, some pigeons started frequenting our balcony. We tried to gently dissuade them from coming (sad but true fact: pigeons are not well-loved in the city), but they were persistent. They made a nest, and before we knew it, they laid two eggs.



At that point, we surrendered. If the pigeons were going to create new lives there, we'd make sure they were okay. It was around this time, too, that schools closed in our city (due to Covid19), and we found ourselves quarantined at home with an eight-year old boy and nothing to do. I turned the pigeons into a multidisciplinary project. My son had to keep an observation journal, combining writing skills and biology. We did research together, for the sake of his project, and learned a ton about pigeons.

The male and female share responsibility. The female spends a bit more time on the nest, from early evening to mid-morning, and the male sits on the nest in the daytime. The male tended to fly away any time he caught sight of us, but the female was more determined to stay put. Perhaps she had a bit more motherly instinct. The two were very coordinated together though. It took 18 days for the eggs to hatch.



When they hatched, the baby birds were tiny pink things with poky yellow feathers. At first, the parent pigeons sat on them all day long, still taking turns. Soon they grew enough that their little bodies would be visible underneath the parent, and eventually, the parents started leaving them alone for hours at a time.

My son played a game with the babies, where he would stand at a distance (to not scare them), and jump up and then squat down. The baby birds would copy him. When he went up, they went up; when he went down, they went down. It was cute to watch, and gave him a little something extra to do during the lockdown.

The babies got braver, and after several weeks, they could walk out of the nest and tour the balcony. When their parents were around, they'd hop back into the nest and chirp excitedly.

The babies look a bit like Frankenstein birds, with misshapen legs, adult wings, and baby heads. They made us laugh.



Yesterday we looked outside and saw no birds. I didn't think I'd miss them when they finally flew away, but there's a part of me that really grew to enjoy those pigeons. In all our research, we learned to respect pigeon ways and I see them with new eyes now. Ironically, we had tried to shoo them away at first, mostly because of the mess they create. But when we let them be to have their nest, they stayed in one spot and the rest of our balcony stayed clean.

Elsewhere in the city, I've seen pigeons make a nest using bits of garbage and plastic. I think this is a reflection of our environment, more so than of the birds. Given the choice, our balcony visitors used bits of our garden, like twigs and dried leaves, to build their nest. We were happy to be able to unexpectedly serve nature in this way. Through our gardening and pigeon adventures, I'm reminded of Amma's words "when we serve nature, nature serves us."

You don't have to be an avid gardener or even have a beautiful space to start with. Just one little plant will start to transform even the smallest balcony or windowsill into a little patch of nature. You never know what might happen next.

- *Natasha*

Do you have a GreenFriends gardening story to share? Satsangs and individuals can submit their greening experiences/ideas or articles to info@greenfriendsna.org.

Happy gardening!