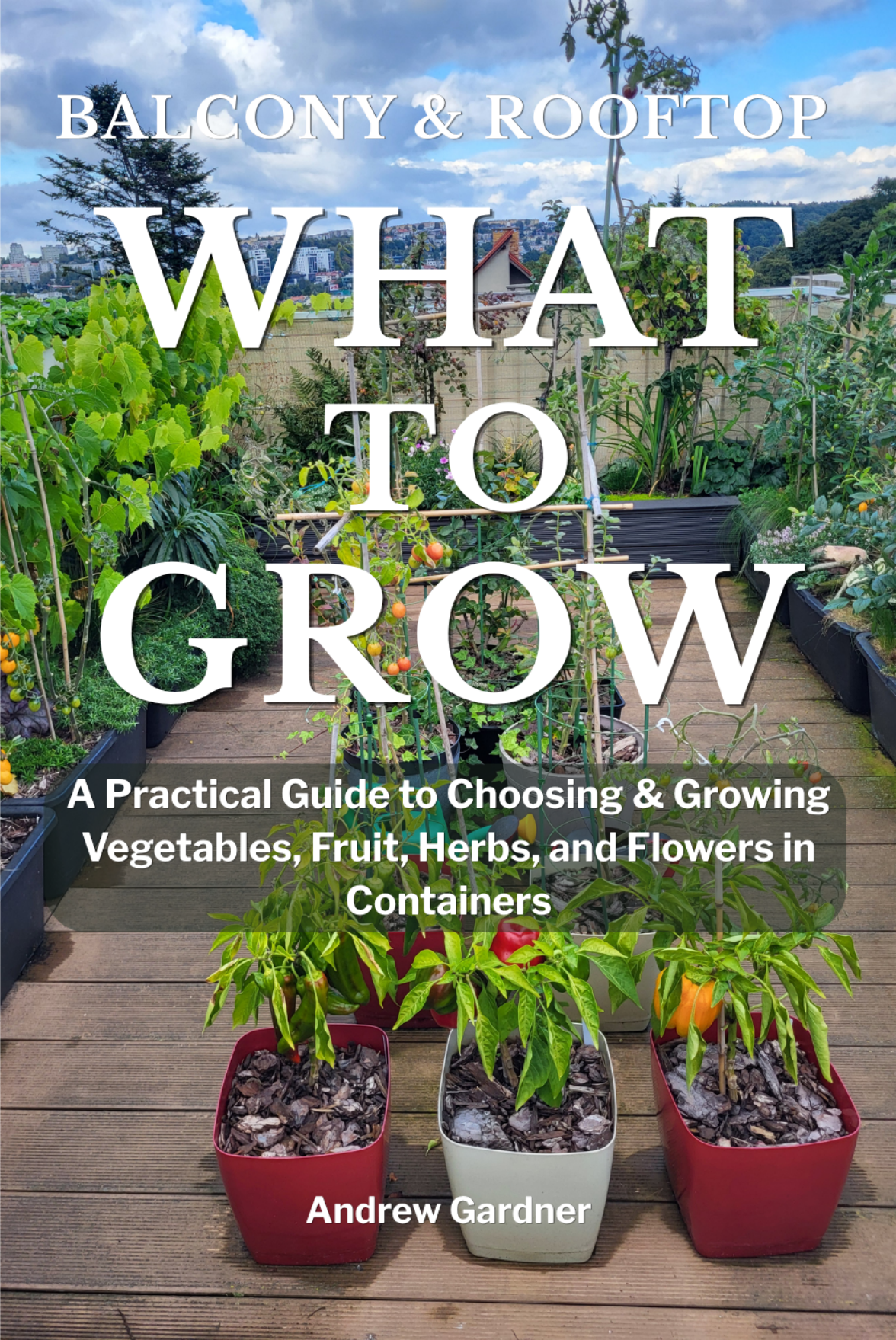

BALCONY & ROOFTOP

WHAT TO GROW

A Practical Guide to Choosing & Growing Vegetables, Fruit, Herbs, and Flowers in Containers

Andrew Gardner

GARDEN ABOVE THE CITY

FREE SAMPLE

Balcony & Rooftop Gardening: What to Grow

Andrew Gardner

This sample includes the Introduction, A Note from Andrew, the reader bonus page, and Chapters 1-2 from the full book.

The complete edition contains 24 chapters plus appendices, plant profiles, Quick Facts, comparison tables, and practical selection guidance for vegetables, fruit, herbs, flowers, and foliage.

In this sample:

- Read Your Balcony or Rooftop
- Match the Plant to the Container

Balcony & Rooftop Gardening: What to Grow

A Practical Guide to Choosing and Growing Vegetables, Fruit, Herbs, and Flowers in Containers

Andrew Gardner

Garden Above the City

Balcony & Rooftop Gardening: What to Grow

A Practical Guide to Choosing and Growing Vegetables, Fruit, Herbs, and Flowers in Containers

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Photographs in this book are by Andrew Gardner unless otherwise stated.
Published by Garden Above the City

Website: gardenabovethecity.com

First edition, 2026
Digital Edition, 2026

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Introduction

Choosing what to grow is one of the most important decisions in any balcony or rooftop garden.

A plant may look perfect in a nursery, garden centre or online catalogue, but that does not mean it will be a good choice for your space. A sunny rooftop exposed to strong wind is very different from a sheltered balcony with only a few hours of direct light. Container size, available space, climate, watering needs and the amount of time you can give your plants all matter.

This book is here to help you make those choices with greater confidence — and avoid many of the frustrations that come from choosing plants that simply do not fit your conditions.

The wrong plant can cost you more than the price of a seedling. It can mean wasted time, money spent on containers, soil and feeding, and months of care that end in disappointment. Choosing more wisely from the beginning gives you a better chance of healthy plants, successful harvests and a garden you actually enjoy.

The reward is not only better-growing plants. It is the satisfaction of creating a space where you can relax, enjoy what you have built yourself and take pride in the food, flowers and greenery around you.

I have my own garden on a rooftop terrace and balcony, where many plants grow in large containers, including adapted 80-litre construction tubs. That experience is the practical foundation of this book.

This book focuses on vegetables, herbs, fruit, flowers and ornamental plants that can be grown in containers on balconies and rooftops. Rather than trying to cover every possible species, it concentrates on practical choices that are useful for small-space gardeners.

Throughout the book you will find Andrew's Experience sections based on what I have actually observed in my own growing spaces. The photographs used with these sections come from my rooftop terrace and balcony.

This book is a companion to my first book, Balcony & Rooftop Gardening for Beginners, which explains the general foundations of container gardening in greater depth. Here, those subjects are kept brief because the main question is different:

What should you grow?

The opening chapters will help you assess your light, space, containers and climate. The plant profiles, Quick Facts, beginner verdicts and comparison tables are designed to help you choose plants that are realistic for your conditions without making the process unnecessarily complicated.

You do not need the largest terrace, the warmest climate or the most expensive containers to create a productive and attractive garden.

You need plants that fit the space you actually have.

That is what this book is here to help you choose.

A Note from Andrew

I did not begin gardening on a rooftop.

Before creating my terrace and balcony garden, I spent about five years growing plants on an allotment. I grew vegetables in raised beds and a greenhouse, kept fruit bushes and a small orchard, grew mini kiwi, flowers and a small strawberry plantation, and learned through both successful seasons and disappointing ones.

Later, moving into container gardening gave me a different set of challenges.

On a rooftop or balcony, roots have less space, containers dry out faster, wind becomes a serious factor and every planting decision matters more. Plants that perform well in open ground do not always behave the same way in containers.

That contrast between growing in the ground and growing above the city has been extremely useful to me.

My first book, Balcony & Rooftop Gardening for Beginners, focused on the foundations of container gardening. This book comes from the next question I kept facing in practice:

Which plants are actually worth growing in a limited space?

The Andrew's Experience sections in this book are based on what I have actually grown, observed, tested, struggled with and learned from. I have included successes, but also problems and failures, because both are useful when deciding what is worth your time, money and space.

My aim is simple: to help you make better choices sooner, avoid some unnecessary mistakes and build a garden that gives you more satisfaction and fewer disappointments.

Andrew Gardner

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Want more practical help with balcony and rooftop gardening?

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PART I — CHOOSE FOR THE SPACE YOU ACTUALLY HAVE

CHAPTER 1

Read Your Balcony or Rooftop

Build Your Growing-Space Profile Before You Buy Plants

The easiest plant to grow is not the same for every balcony.

A tomato may be a sensible choice for a sunny, sheltered terrace with room for a large container. The same plant can become a disappointing project on a shaded, exposed balcony. A fern may struggle in the first space and thrive in the second.

This does not make one balcony better than the other. It means that plants should be chosen for the conditions you actually have.

Before using the plant profiles in this book, take a few minutes to examine your growing space. You do not need specialist equipment or a complicated scoring system. You need an honest description of:

- light;
- heat;
- wind;
- safe container capacity;
- access to water;
- time available for care;
- winter conditions;
- what you want from the garden.

Together, these answers create your Growing-Space Profile. You will use it to compare your balcony or rooftop with the Quick Facts at the beginning of every plant profile.

Do this before buying plants. Garden centres are excellent at showing you what looks attractive today. They are less reliable at asking where the plant will live for the next five years.

Safety Comes Before Plant Choice

A balcony or rooftop garden adds weight and introduces objects that may be exposed to wind, people, pets, and falling risks. Plant selection begins with a safety check.

Ask:
• Do you know whether the structure can safely carry the planned containers?
• Do the building rules, lease, strata rules, body corporate, or homeowners' association permit the containers and fixtures you want to use?
• Are railing planters, hanging baskets, trellises, and wind screens securely fixed and suitable for the location?
• Can water drain without falling onto neighbours, walls, walkways, or electrical equipment?
• Could a child or pet climb on a container or reach a harmful plant?
• Could a pot, support, tool, or other object fall from the balcony or rooftop?

Water alone weighs approximately 1 kilogram per litre or 8.34 pounds per US gallon. The complete load also includes the container, wet growing medium, plant, supports, stored water, furniture, and people.

This book cannot calculate the safe load of your building. If the limit is unknown, check the building documents or ask a qualified local professional before using heavy containers or permanent fixtures. Do not try to balance a safety problem with an advantage elsewhere. Ten hours of sunlight do not make an overloaded balcony safe.

Your Growing Space in Eight Questions

Walk around the space at different times of day. If it has clearly different conditions, treat them as separate growing areas. A sunny railing, a sheltered corner, and a shaded wall may support three different groups of plants.

1. How Much Direct Sun Does the Space Receive?

Count direct sunlight during the main growing season. Do not rely only on the direction the balcony faces. Nearby buildings, trees, screens, railings, and the height of the sun can change the result.

Direct sun	General description
0–2 hours	Shade
3–5 hours	Partial shade
6–8 hours	Sunny
More than 8 hours	Very sunny; heat stress may also become important.

Record when the sunlight arrives. Morning sun is usually gentler than strong afternoon sun. Also distinguish bright open shade from deep shade between buildings.

These categories describe the space, not a guarantee of performance. A crop grown for fruit generally needs more usable light than a plant grown mainly for leaves. The plant profiles give the relevant requirement.

2. How Hot Does It Become?
Light and temperature are connected, but they are not the same thing. A balcony can receive moderate direct sun and still become very hot if glass, concrete, pale walls, paving, or metal surfaces reflect heat onto the plants.

Choose the closest description:

• Mild: containers rarely become hot and there is little reflected heat.
• Warm: pots dry faster on sunny days, but plants usually recover normally.
• Hot: surrounding surfaces noticeably increase heat around the plants.
• Extremely hot: leaves repeatedly scorch or wilt, and containers become very hot.

Observe the space during the hottest part of the day, not only in the morning when you would prefer to stand there.

3. How Windy Is It?
Wind changes more than stability. It increases water loss, damages large leaves, breaks unsupported stems, and can affect flowers and young fruit.

Choose the closest description:

• Sheltered: damaging wind is uncommon.
• Breezy: air moves regularly, but most containers and plants remain stable.
• Windy: pots dry quickly and tall plants need reliable support.
• Highly exposed: strong or turbulent wind limits both plant choice and safe equipment.

Look at what the wind actually does. Moving containers, torn leaves, broken stems, rapid drying, or flowers falling prematurely tell you more than a weather app reading taken at ground level.

4. What Size Containers Can You Safely Use?

The largest container you can safely accommodate affects the plants you can choose.

Largest practical container	Likely possibilities
Under 10 L / 2.6 US gal	Small herbs, compact flowers, and short-lived leafy crops
10–30 L / 2.6–8 US gal	Many herbs, lettuces, compact vegetables, and ornamental plants
30–60 L / 8–16 US gal	Many fruiting vegetables and medium-sized perennial plants
More than 60 L / 16 US gal	Larger crops and long-term shrubs, if the load is safe

Container volume is only part of the decision. Also consider:

- width and depth for the root system;
- room for the mature plant;
- space for supports;
- stability in wind;
- clear drainage holes;
- access for watering and maintenance;
- how the container will eventually be emptied or moved.

A young plant in a nursery pot can be misleading. Select the container for the plant's realistic mature needs, not its size on the day you buy it.

The previous book, Balcony & Rooftop Gardening for Beginners, explains container materials, drainage, growing media, weight, and practical setup in greater detail. This chapter focuses on using container capacity to choose suitable plants.

5. How Easy Will Watering Be?

Choose the description that matches your normal routine:

- Easy: a nearby tap, hose, reliable stored water, or tested irrigation is available.
- Manageable: regular watering is possible but requires some effort.
- Difficult: water must be carried far, its use is restricted, or drainage creates a problem.

Small pots dry more quickly than large containers. Sun, heat, wind, thirsty plants, and vigorous growth increase water use. Rain does not always wet the root ball because leaves, roofs, and balcony structures may deflect it.
Do not choose plants according to an imaginary watering routine. Choose them according to the care you can provide during a normal busy week and during hot weather.

If you travel, decide whether a reliable person or a tested irrigation system will care for the plants. A timer alone is not proof that every container receives the right amount of water.

Most plants do not require a home water laboratory. Water chemistry becomes important when a plant is sensitive to rising pH, especially blueberry and other acid-loving plants. In that situation, check the report from your water supplier or ask a reputable local gardening adviser.

Measuring and adjusting pH is explained in the previous book, Balcony & Rooftop Gardening for Beginners.

6. How Much Time Can You Realistically Give the Plants?

Choose the honest answer:

• Occasional care: one or two proper care sessions per week, plus quick checks during extreme weather.
• Regular care: brief checks on most days during active growth.
• Hands-on gardening: daily attention when the weather or crop requires it.

Maintenance includes more than watering. Depending on the plant, it may include feeding, tying stems, pruning, removing faded flowers, checking for pests, harvesting, and winter protection.

A small collection of healthy plants is more useful than twenty neglected containers. Enthusiasm is free. Saturday afternoon is not.

7. What Can You Do With Plants in Winter?

Your realistic options may include:

• leaving containers outdoors without additional protection;
• sheltering or insulating containers outdoors;
• moving plants to an unheated but protected place;
• bringing selected plants into a suitable indoor space with enough light.

Do not assume that a plant described as hardy in the ground will be equally safe in a container. Roots above ground are more exposed to freezing, drying wind, repeated temperature changes, and wet winter conditions.

Climate labels are starting points, not complete instructions. USDA zones mainly describe average annual extreme minimum temperatures. Canada has its own official plant-hardiness system. The RHS uses hardiness ratings for the United Kingdom, while Australian gardeners also need to consider whether they live in an arid, tropical, subtropical, temperate, or cool zone.

Local frost dates, summer heat, humidity, rainfall, wind, season length, and the balcony's microclimate still matter. Regional guidance in this book will tell you what to check, but locally recommended plants and cultivars are usually the safest purchase.

8. What Do You Want From the Garden?
Choose no more than three main goals:

• easy first harvests;
• fresh vegetables or fruit;
• herbs for cooking;
• flowers and colour;
• support for pollinators;
• privacy or screening;
• long-term fruit plants;
• a low-maintenance display;
• learning and experimentation.

Also consider your budget, the number of containers you want to maintain, and whether children or pets can reach the plants.

Your goals help you choose between plants that could all grow in the space. Someone who wants a quick first harvest may prefer lettuce or radishes. Someone planning a long-term fruit garden may accept the larger containers, slower reward, and extra care required by fruit bushes.

Write Your Growing-Space Profile

Complete this sentence:

My growing space is _____, receives about _____ hours of direct sun, and is _____ exposed to wind. I can safely use containers up to _____. Watering is _____, I can provide _____ care, and my winter option is _____. I mainly want to grow _____.

Example:

My growing space is warm, receives about four hours of morning sun, and is quite windy. I can safely use containers up to 25 litres. Watering is easy, I can provide regular care, and plants must remain outdoors in winter. I mainly want to grow herbs, quick crops, and flowers.

If the space contains different zones, write a separate line for each one. This may reveal more possibilities than a single description of the whole balcony.

Do not convert the result into a percentage. A shaded space is not automatically worse than a sunny one, and a windy space is not improved by adding points for easy watering. The purpose is to describe the conditions, not grade them.

Use Your Profile With Quick Facts

Every plant profile begins with Quick Facts. Compare its requirements with your Growing-Space Profile in five passes: light, container, care, climate and any essential special requirement such as acidic mix, support or a pollination partner. Chapter 5 explains every field.

One serious mismatch is enough to remove a plant from the shortlist. Extra sunlight cannot compensate for an undersized container, and easy watering cannot provide safe winter conditions.

Where to Check Your Regional Climate

Use these respected starting points, then look for more local advice where necessary:

- United States: USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map [1]
- Canada: Natural Resources Canada Plant Hardiness Site [2]
- United Kingdom: RHS Hardiness Ratings [3]
- Australia: Gardening Australia Vegie Guide Zones [4]

For annual vegetables and flowers, pay particular attention to local frost dates, summer temperatures, and the useful length of the growing season. For perennial herbs, fruit plants, shrubs, and climbers, also check winter hardiness and remember that roots in containers receive less protection than roots in the ground.

Before You Continue

Write one Growing-Space Profile for each meaningfully different zone and keep it beside you while reading. It should record useful sun, heat, wind, safe container capacity, water access, available care, winter options and your three main goals. This is the filter that turns attractive plants into a practical shortlist.

CHAPTER 2

Match the Plant to the Container

Choose for the Mature Plant, Not the Nursery Pot

A small plant does not necessarily need a small container.

The pot on a garden-centre shelf is designed to hold a young plant until it is sold. It does not tell you how much root space the plant will need when it is mature, carrying fruit, exposed to wind, or living in the same container for several years.

This is one of the easiest mistakes to make. A young tomato, blueberry bush, raspberry, or fruit tree may look perfectly comfortable in a small nursery pot. After planting, however, its roots must provide water and nutrients for a much larger plant.

The right container must support:

- the plant's root system;
- its mature top growth;
- its water needs;
- any stake, cage, or trellis;
- the expected length of time in the pot;
- stable performance during heat and wind.

Container size is therefore part of plant selection. It is not a decision to postpone until after you have bought the plant.

What the Minimum Container Size Means

Each plant profile in this book gives a realistic minimum container size. Unless the profile says otherwise, the figure is for one plant.

The minimum means the smallest container in which a beginner can reasonably expect the plant to grow and perform with normal care. It is not:

- the size of the nursery pot;
- a guarantee of the maximum possible harvest;
- permission to squeeze several plants into the same volume;
- proof that the container will be stable in your conditions;
- the best size for every cultivar and climate.

A larger suitable container usually provides a greater reserve of growing medium, water, and nutrients. It may also reduce rapid drying. That does not mean that every young plant should immediately be placed in the largest pot available. An oversized container can keep unused growing medium wet for too long, particularly around a small root ball.

For long-term plants, potting up in stages is often more practical. The final container must still be included in your planning from the beginning. If you cannot safely accommodate it later, the plant may be the wrong choice now.

Volume Is Only One Part of the Answer

Two containers can hold the same number of litres or gallons and still suit different plants.

A broad trough offers a different root area from a tall, narrow pot. A wide container may be more stable, while a narrow container may tip when supporting a tall plant. A decorative pot that becomes narrower at the opening may be difficult to empty once a woody root ball has filled it.

When reading a plant profile, check four measurements:

1. Volume: how much growing medium the container holds.
2. Depth: how much vertical root space is available.
3. Width: how much horizontal space the roots and plant base receive.
4. Base and shape: whether the mature plant and its support will remain stable.

The usable root space may also be smaller than the advertised container volume. Internal water reservoirs, false bottoms, and other built-in features can reduce the amount of growing medium. Use the actual growing volume when comparing the container with the plant profile.

Do not assume that roots will simply grow down into standing water. A self-watering container is a designed system in which water reaches the growing medium in a controlled way. Permanent saturation is not a substitute for adequate root space and drainage.

Four Practical Root Patterns

The following groups are selection tools, not rigid botanical categories. Roots change their shape when confined by a container, and plants within the same group may still need very different volumes.

Shallow or Fibrous Roots
These plants use much of the upper part of the growing medium. Examples can include many leafy crops, strawberries, some annual flowers, and blueberries.

They often benefit from width rather than unnecessary height, but shallow-rooted does not mean carefree or suitable for a tiny pot.

A shallow root zone can dry quickly in sun and wind. A blueberry also needs enough total volume for a long-lived woody shrub, even though much of its fine root system remains relatively close to the surface. Its roots also need acidic, evenly moist but well-aerated growing medium.

When choosing a container, consider:

• sufficient surface area for the roots;
• enough total volume to prevent rapid drying;
• room for the expected number of plants;
• the plant's life span and mature size.

Deep or Length-Sensitive Roots
Some plants need useful vertical space. For root crops, the harvested part itself may determine the necessary depth. A long carrot cannot develop normally in a shallow window box, although a short or round cultivar may be suitable.

Tall fruiting vegetables may also benefit from a deeper, substantial root zone, but depth alone is not enough. A narrow tower of growing medium can still provide too little volume and poor stability.

Check:

• the useful internal depth, not the outside height;
• the expected length or form of the harvested root;
• total growing-medium volume;
• stability once the plant becomes tall or top-heavy.

Spreading or Vigorous Roots
Some plants rapidly occupy the available container or spread through runners, rhizomes, or suckers. Mint is a familiar example. Raspberries and other vigorous perennial plants may also produce new shoots away from the original stem.

These plants need room to spread and may dominate a shared container. A separate pot can make control easier, but the pot still needs to support healthy long-term growth.

Before buying, check:

• expected mature spread;
• whether the plant produces runners, rhizomes, or suckers;
• whether division, pruning, or repotting will be required;
• whether you can remove the root ball from the chosen container later.

Long-Term Woody Roots
Fruit bushes, shrubs, climbers, and compact trees remain in containers for years. Their root systems gradually fill the available space while the growing medium loses structure and volume.
These plants need more than a pot that works for the first season. They may eventually require:

• a larger container;
• refreshed growing medium;
• root inspection or root pruning where appropriate;
• pruning of top growth;
• improved winter protection;
• replacement if the plant can no longer be maintained sensibly in the available space.

Cultivar and rootstock matter. A fruit tree described simply as “dwarf” is not automatically suitable for every balcony. Its eventual size, vigour, support, pollination needs, and rootstock must be confirmed before purchase

One Container, One Plant—or More?

The minimum container figure in Quick Facts normally applies to one main plant. If several large plants share a pot, they share the same water, nutrients, and root space.
This does not mean that every container must hold only one species. Compatible plants can share a container when there is enough volume and their needs are similar. A short-lived leafy crop may also be harvested before the main plant occupies the space.

Ask:

• How large will all the plants become?
• Will their roots occupy the same part of the container?
• Do they need similar moisture and soil conditions?
• Will one plant shade or overwhelm the others?
• Can the container supply enough water during hot weather?

Companion planting does not create additional litres of growing medium. Count every permanent plant when judging capacity.

Match the Container to the Length of the Project

Short crops and long-term plants place different demands on a container.

Short-term and seasonal crops
Lettuce, radishes, many annual flowers, and other quick crops may occupy a container for only part of one season. They can often use smaller or shallower containers when moisture is checked carefully and the root form fits the depth.

Full-season crops
Tomatoes, peppers, climbing beans, cucumbers, and other productive crops must support months of growth, flowers, and harvests. Their containers need enough volume to reduce water stress and support the mature plant. Tall crops also need secure support and sensible spacing.

Long-term plants
Perennial herbs, fruit bushes, shrubs, climbers, and trees remain after the first harvest or flowering season. Choose them only if you can provide their later container size, maintenance, and winter protection.

The longer the project, the less useful the nursery pot becomes as a guide.

Mature Size Changes Stability

Roots are only half of the container problem. The growth above the pot can act like a sail.

A tall tomato, climbing bean, vigorous climber, or small tree places force on the container and its support. A plant that seems stable in spring may become top-heavy after producing a full canopy or crop.

Before planting, check:

- mature height and spread;
- whether the plant needs a stake, cage, or trellis;
- whether the support can be secured safely;
- whether the container has a sufficiently stable base;
- whether wind can move the whole arrangement;
- whether the combined weight is safe for the structure.

Do not rely on a heavier container as the only solution to wind. Additional weight increases the structural load and does not make an unsafe trellis attachment acceptable.

What to Check Before Buying

The plant label may not contain everything you need. Before purchasing, check:

• the exact species and cultivar;
• mature height and spread;
• growth habit;
• recommended minimum container size;
• useful container depth and width;
• whether one plant or several are intended per container;
• support requirements;
• annual or long-term growth;
• repotting or root-management needs;
• rootstock for grafted fruit trees;
• the final weight and safe placement of the container.

Avoid relying on vague labels such as “patio plant,” “compact,” or “dwarf” without checking what those words mean for that cultivar. Compact compared with a field-grown plant may still be too large for your balcony.

Use Quick Facts, Not Guesswork

When you reach a plant profile, compare its Minimum Container and Root Pattern with your Growing-Space Profile from Chapter 1.

Ask:

1. Can I safely accommodate the minimum volume?
2. Does the container provide the necessary width or depth?
3. Is there room for the mature plant and its support?
4. Can I maintain this container for the whole life of the project?
5. If several plants share it, is the total growing volume still realistic?

If the answer to an essential question is no, choose another plant. A container that is too small cannot be repaired with extra fertiliser, more frequent watering, or optimism.

The aim is not to fit the greatest possible number of plants into the available space. It is to choose a manageable number that can grow well.

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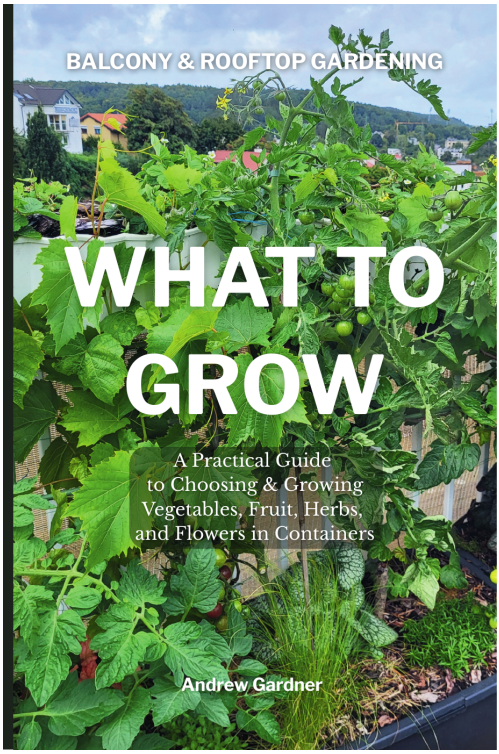

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