

A Quick Guide

Based on a March 2009 Canada Blooms presentation, in collaboration with Toronto Master Gardeners

Toronto Balconies Bloom



The Benefits of a Balcony in Bloom

Gardens are good for the soul, the body, the environment and the community!

There is a huge gardening opportunity for apartment and condo dwellers. You don't need a house or yard in order reap the benefits of having a garden. Cities and towns have acres of untapped growing space on their balconies.

Gardening is the experience of creating beauty.

In addition, gardening is a great way to reduce stress, get a bit of exercise, be creative, and develop patience.

Gardening relieves stress, helping you to unwind, relax, clear your mind and refocus

attention on nature's splendour.

Gardening is a great way of exercising outdoors, exposed to natural air, focused on a pleasant activity.

Eating home-grown vegetables is a simple way to ensure that a body is getting a proper balance of vitamins and nutrients.

Gardens improve the air we breathe.

And finally, some studies even report that people who are exposed to gardens and gardening recover more quickly from illnesses.

It seems that for many of us, gardening is just what the doctor ordered.



What a lovely welcome this balcony above the portico presents.

The Balcony in Bloom

- Beautifies building
- Improves air quality
- Provides locally grown food
- Promotes community
- Benefits physical and mental health

Whose Balcony Is It, Anyway?

Although your balcony is for your private use, it is not your private space! It is owned by the building owners, and is subject to condo bylaws or apartment regulations. These can control weight restrictions, whether or not you may make holes in the walls or floors, whether you may

use a BBQ, or even whether your balcony is allowed to look very different from the others. Check with your condo Board or apartment management before planning your garden!

In addition, there are city safety by-laws to consider, which

determine the height of the railings, for example. For safety, also, pots and benches should be one metre back from edge, and window boxes and pots should be hung *inside* the railing. And, of course, do consider your neighbours when watering or sweeping up debris and soil.

Look First, Plan Next, Plant Last

Balconies have special space and privacy challenges. They are often long and narrow, shady, lack privacy, and experience extremes of temperature and wind. Toronto has fierce winters and hot, humid, airless summers. Think not just of the view *from* your balcony but also *of* it, from inside your apartment! Plan focal points. Smooth out corners of long, narrow spaces with multi-levelled plant groupings.

How do you plan to use your balcony space? For breakfast? For napping? Do you need seating for two or would one great lounge suit your needs better? Use graph paper to draw a floor plan of your balcony space and measure your furniture to make sure it fits.

Choose simple, serviceable furnishings using weather-friendly materials. Durable materials such as teak, resin or metal furnishings are easiest. Select fabrics that are fade, water and stain resistant and area rugs in synthetic fibres or natural sea grass. Add lighting and art: tree

twigs threaded with fairy lights, arrangements of sticks and stones, sculptures, water features are all easier to look after than plants.

How will you get water to your plants? Is there an outside tap? Must you lug buckets from your kitchen or bath? There are 50 foot hoses that attach to your taps. If your building doesn't permit hosing, at least bring the hose to balcony door and fill your watering can there. Check out drip irrigation systems, also.

Think about access, too. Make sure you can get the containers and plants up the elevator and onto your balcony.

What about storage? Where will you put the soil, fertilizers, cushions, tools, etc? Tools can be kept in your kitchen in or in a handy tool belt hung in closet, but you may want to include a tidy storage unit on the balcony itself - a cedar bench, perhaps.

When choosing plants, remember that the climate on your balcony is much harsher than at ground level. To be safe,

choose plants that are rated for Zone 4 or 3.

Containers can dry out in one day or less. Water when you are making morning coffee and when you get home from work! You will need to fertilize often, too. Or look for self-watering planters, available from many sources.

Think about what will happen to your plants in winter. Do you have a place to store them indoors -or will you donate them to a friend with an 'inground' garden?

Finally, consider the 3 Bs:

- **Budget:** for design help and purchases
- **Body:** gardening does require work, so consider your back and your energy level
- **Busy:** be realistic about the time available for maintaining your garden

Despite the challenges, with a little planning, you, too, can create and enjoy a garden retreat high above ground!



Early balcony gardening: hanging gardens of Babylon.

The city gardener is a determined soul who must sow where there are more obstacles and inhabitants than soil.
Linda Yang, *The City Gardener's Handbook*

Containing Your Garden

Wooden containers are porous and easy to make, but are heavy to move, will deteriorate, and may harbour insects and disease. Clay pots are also porous and will absorb insoluble salts along with water and oxygen. They dry out quickly, can be expensive, and will crack if left out in the winter. Plastic pots are usually

inexpensive, light, colourful and easy to clean, but don't breathe and must have adequate drainage to prevent soggy roots. Fibreglas and polyethylene are attractive, modern and expensive. Metal is heavy and gets hot. Recipes and workshops on making hypertufa planters for sedums and similar plants abound, but the pots are

heavy and will disintegrate with time. Baskets on walls and trellises are fun and can be changed with the seasons.

Buy one stunning larger container and make it a focal point, among others of varying sizes, but similar materials, colours and styles. Continued ...



Small, but lush balcony garden in bloom.

Containing Your Garden, cont.

Capitalize on vertical space with trellises, hooks, bracket, wall-mounted flat-backed pots, pockets and urns, poles, even 3-tiered wire baskets. Stack pots on shelves, ladders, milk crates or unused pots.

Select the best size for your plant, ensuring adequate root

space and remember that large containers need less watering.

Ensure drainage. If the pot has no holes, use a thick layer of Styrofoam peanuts or crushed plastic cell packs. These are also good to lighten the weight of the filled container, but if your space is subject to strong winds, add

stones, instead! Place containers with holes on stones, or 'feet' to let water drain away. Line the bottom with landscape cloth or used dryer sheets to retain soil.

To overwinter trees, shrubs or perennials insulate by lining large containers with Styrofoam or ¾ inch builder's foam.

The Real Dirt: Soils, Fertilizers, Controls

In fact, 'dirt' is not the best thing for your container garden. Plain garden or topsoil is too heavy and dense and will pack down and not drain well.

There are several types of growing medium or 'soiless mix' on the market. Usually made of peat moss, vermiculite and perlite, they are light in weight, retain water and yet porous, providing drainage and aeration, but will not provide the nutrients your plants will need, so you will need to use a

good general liquid fertilizer, every 7 to 10 days. Some mixes do include fertilizers and gels to retain water.

Vermicomposting is a good option for apartment dwellers, since all you need is a container, wet newspaper, and a tangle of hungry red worms. Start up kits are available from organic gardening sources. Worms will devour 5X their weight in kitchen waste and return it in the form of worm castings, an excellent soil additive.

Use good organic gardening practices to maintain healthy plants that can fend off pests more successfully.

When combating weeds, insects and plant diseases, use less invasive tactics first.

Use organic herbicides, insecticides and fungicides carefully and only when simpler solutions have failed and only when the costs of the treatment are less than the cost of replacing the plant.

Make sure your balcony can support the weight of your garden. A half barrel of wet soil is 200 lbs. and a 5 foot tall juniper tree nearly 600!

Plants for Sun For Shade

Annuals: Ivy Geraniums, Petunias, Bacopias, Bidens, Blue Fan Flower, Browallia, Nicotiana, Nasturtium, Verbena

Perennials: Catmint, Phlox, Daylilies, Coneflowers, Shasta Daisy, Marguerites, Monarda, Yarrow, Gaillardia, Sedums

Annuals: Impatiens, Swedish Ivy, Coleus, Fuchsias, Oxalis, Elephant Ears, Begonias

Perennials: Ferns, Hostas, Lady's Mantle, Primroses, Epimedium, Perennial Ivy, Lemon Balm, Bergenia, Lilies, Heuchera

For Style!

Tall Grasses: Feather Reed Grass 'Karl Foerster', Fountain Grass 'Burgundy Giant', Japanese Silver or Flame Grass

Roses: Patio, Fairy, 'Explorer'

Shrubs & Trees: Purple-leaf Sand Cherry, Dwarf Lilac, Box Euonymous, Serviceberry, Weeping Crabapple, Standard Hydrangea, Dwarf Conifers



Flowers basking in the sun!



Colourful foliage plants flourishing in the shade

Grow Your Own Fruit and Vegetables!

Yes, you can grow your own food several stories above ground, as long as you have 5-6 hours of sunlight.

When buying seeds or seedlings, be on the look out for key words such as bush, compact, and space saver in the plant descriptions. Then plant your veggies in the right depth of container:

4 inches - Lettuce, radishes, beets, low-growing herbs

6 inches - Chard, turnips, short-rooted carrots

8 inches - Eggplant, peppers, bush cucumbers

10 inches - Cauliflower, broccoli

12 inches - Tomatoes, long-rooted carrots

Here are some vegetable plant varieties to get your vegetable container garden growing.

Cucumbers: Salad Bush Hybrid, Spacemaster

Eggplant: Bambino, Little Fingers

Green Beans: (Pole beans give a higher yield in a small footprint) Blue Lake, Kentucky Wonder, French Dwarf

Green Onions: Evergreen Bunching

Leaf Lettuce: Buttercrunch, Tom Thumb

Peppers: Cubanelle, Sweet Banana, Jalapeno

Radishes: Cherry Belle

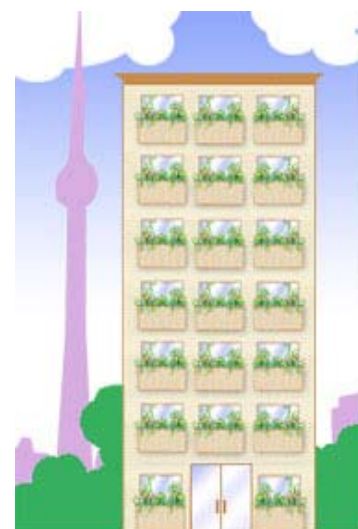
Squash: Ronde de Nice

Tomatoes: Patio, Pixie, Tiny Tim, Saladette, Red Robin

You can grow fruit, too.

Raspberry, currant, gooseberry and Saskatoon bushes will flourish in large containers.

Columnar apples are very productive in little space. And strawberries are terrific in hanging baskets.



Gardening questions?

www.torontomastergardeners.ca

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www.torontobalconiesbloom.ca

What is Toronto Balconies Bloom?

A volunteer project to inspire and support residents with balconies to create thriving balcony gardens in the city of Toronto

A way to shine a "grow-light" on balcony gardening and strengthen the community of local enthusiasts

A way to get helpful gardening information and supplies into people's hands and onto their balconies

An umbrella for untold future activities

Toronto Balconies Bloom supports both communities and individuals. We encourage gardeners with diverse experience and interests to work together within individual buildings, neighbourhoods or community groups.

This is our chance to bloom together.