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Grow Bags: An Alternative Way to Grow Vegetables in Small Spaces

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Many people would love to grow their own vegetables but are limited by the lack of space. For some, the answer has been to grow a garden in containers. Container gardens give many without the area for raised beds or in ground, the ability to grow vegetables. However, using hard sided containers made from terra cotta or ceramic comes with its own set of challenges. These pots are heavy, difficult to move, and should be stored inside a shed or other covered area during the colder months of winter. Yes - you could just leave them outside, but who wants to look at a pile of empty pots all winter? Another problem is that plants tend to become root bound in hard sided containers which reduces the amount of vegetables that can be harvested during the growing season.

As someone who has grown vegetables in containers for many years, I decided several years ago to try an alternate method. I started to experiment growing vegetables in grow bags rather than traditional containers. Grow bags are not a new idea. Archeological research has found that the ancient Greeks and Egyptians grew vegetables in woven baskets that were placed next to or on the roofs of their homes. The modern era of using grow bags started in the 1970's and were primarily used in greenhouses.

Over the years, some gardeners have found that using grow bags is an easy and cost effective way to grow vegetables in small spaces. As a result you can now find them for sale at many nurseries, hardware, farm, and some building supply stores. They come in multiple colors and sizes. They are lightweight, easy to clean, and easy to store. Most will tell you how much soil to add to the bag, along with how many and what type of plants you can grow. Some come with their own trellis that are designed to attach to the side of the bag. Many have handles sewn into the sides to facilitate moving the bag. This is especially nice for people who move their plants to take advantage of the best sunlight in the summer months. At the end of the growing season the bags can be emptied, washed, and put away for the winter. Washing entails nothing more than spraying the bags with a mild bleach solution, rinsing out with a hose, and then drying outside. As for longevity, most merchants will tell you that the bags will last about five years. I can tell

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you from experience that I have been using my bags for the last five years and all are still intact, although they do show some signs of wear and tear.

Manufactured grow bags are made from a breathable fabric that allows for better drainage and soil aeration. Due to the type of material used, it is almost impossible to overwater your plants. However they require you to water more often, especially on very hot days. Root bounding, which is a serious problem with hard sided containers, will not occur in a grow bag. Instead, the plants roots will die back when they encounter the fabric sides of the grow bag. This causes new roots to grow which has been shown to improve the amount of vegetables harvested in containers made from a breathable fabric. The fabric also allows the soil in the plant to stay cooler on very hot days.

It is recommended that only potting mix, not potting soil, should be used in grow bags. Many companies sell soil mixes that you can just pour into the bag and plant your vegetables. However, many people make their own mix. I prefer to use a mixture of equal parts manure, potting mix and vermiculite. In winter you can empty the soil into a compost pile and reuse later. If you do not have the space, consider storing the soil in trash cans. The next year simply add about twenty percent fresh soil and refill your grow bags. Since many vegetables are heavy feeders you will need to fertilize often. I add fertilizer to my plants about once a month. Fertilizer should always be added after watering as dry soil does not absorb fertilizer efficiently.

The first public education class in June will be a “Summer Pruning Demonstration” with Master Gardeners Pam Lane and Bill Curtaz. Join us as they discuss pruning safety, disease control during pruning, and summer pruning to keep our fruit trees low. Shorter trees lend to easier tending — a much better experience for the home gardener! Saturday, June 3 from 9am to noon at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, 6699 Campus Drive, Placerville. The class is free but Folsom Lake College will be charging \$2/car parking on all days starting in June.

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news. You can also find us on Facebook.