

INTRODUCTION



Your home is your garden

You don't need a garden to be a gardener. With a bit of imagination, patience and trial and error, you can fill your windowsills, kitchen counters, bookshelves and more with glorious greenery that you can eat, use to flavour your cooking, brew into a relaxing tea or simply enjoy for what it brings to your home.

The best bit is that you hardly have to spend anything. There are lots of companies online that will send you a whole host of fully grown houseplants apparently perfect for your space, but the truth is that it is easy to grow your own plants from seeds, cuttings and even from kitchen scraps that we would usually throw away. There's no need to buy expensive containers either -

there are plenty of ways you can personalize your plants, such as repurposing tin cans to create a herb garden, making your own hanging baskets or planting **chilli** (see page 97) plants in small coffee sacks.

This book will show you how to green up your home while growing things you can actually eat. Just because you don't have any outdoor space doesn't mean a crop of delicious homegrown **tomatoes** (see page 142) or **baby spinach** (see page 35) is out of reach. Some of the plants in these pages are so easy to grow you can even do so to order – how about a trayful of **microgreens** (see page 26), **pea shoots** (see page 32) or **radishes** (see page 56) ready for your next dinner party?

Whether you're already pretty sure you have a green thumb or you are a complete beginner, have a look through these pages, see what inspires you, grab some compost and make a start. Gardening – indoors or out – is not an exact science; it's all about instinct and the only way to learn is by doing.

Get growing

First things first, what spots do you have in your living space that would be a good home for your garden? Your kitchen is the most obvious for herbs and other edibles, but what about other places, such as bookshelves, coffee tables, hallways – even the stairs. Don't forget that – in spite of the name of this book – so long as they are getting the light they need, plants don't have to just live on windowsills; they can also hang in baskets, stack on work surfaces or sit on the tops of cupboards.

Have a walk around your house and think about where the best growing spots might be. For some plants, a lot of light is non-negotiable – for example, **lavender** (see page 108) and particularly citrus trees, such as **lemon** (see page 151) and **dwarf mandarin** (see page 148) – whereas others, such as **ferns** (see page 80) or **bean sprouts** (see page 38), need far less. Some plants are very happy somewhere with a lot of humidity, but others will struggle. You may find that different places work at different times of the year, too – a warm, sunny windowsill in the spring might become a toaster

for your plants by the middle of summer. Sunlight and temperature will be the biggest deciding factors for your plants, so you may find that spring and early autumn are your best growing seasons for edibles.

The best way to find out is just to try. As a lot of the plants covered in this book can be grown from kitchen scraps you would have otherwise thrown away, and you can fashion a plant pot from almost anything (see page 22), the only thing you need to buy is a bit of compost. Experiment with different seedlings and cuttings in different locations at different times of the year. You'll soon get the hang of observing and listening to your plants and you'll be able to tell when they are happy and when they might need a change of scene. And, yes, of course you should talk to them!



Your windowsill family

The plants in these pages have been chosen because you should be able to grow all of them indoors on a sunny windowsill, though they do present different levels of challenge. So if you're a novice it might be best to start with some herbs and some **microgreens** (see page 26) rather than going straight in with **doorstep potatoes** (see page 165) and a **dwarf mandarin tree** (see page 148).

It's usually best to begin with a few cuttings and some seeds and see how you get on. As mentioned above, some spots in your home will be better for growing plants than others - more on this below. As your confidence grows, so can your windowsill family.

Of course, think about what you will actually use, how much space it will take up and how long it will take to grow. If you're going away in a couple of weeks, then there's not much point planting a lot of seeds that will just be coming up and needing watering as you're packing your bags. If you don't like spicy food then there's little point in growing **chillies** (see page 97).

Greening up your home: the basics

In the main, just a bit of patience, a little sunshine and a dash of creativity is all you need to get started. Apart from that, a lot of the plants in this book just need some compost and some care. Although many can be grown for free from cuttings or kitchen scraps in a pot you've repurposed, there are a few extra tools that you will find helpful, particularly as you start to expand your windowsill garden.





A small watering can with a rose or 'shower' attachment



A spray mister (when planting seeds and caring for seedlings)



Scissors, for harvest time



A thermometer (really handy for knowing how warm different spots in your home are when trying to figure out what might flourish there)



Potting mix

Soil, glorious soil

Here's a topic that can entertain gardeners for hours. It's true that some fussy plants do need a particular potting mix (and less fussy ones, too - for example, **succulents** (see page 103) require a mix containing lots of sand, or similar, for drainage). But, on the other hand, a good indoor potting compost that is well aerated and will hold on to water can be used for most things, particularly edibles. It is important to get one that's up to the job, though - growing indoors comes with different considerations and getting the right potting mix will make a big difference to the success of your windowsill garden.

Some mixes for indoor gardening don't contain any soil at all - they're based on coir, which is ground-up coconut fibre, with such ingredients as bone meal, peat moss and vermiculite (sometimes perlite) added in. Vermiculite (or perlite) is the little white or light brown specks you see in the mix. It helps the soil stay aerated and retain moisture and is a useful and important ingredient.



Whatever you do, though, don't use soil from outside to pot up your indoor plants, and if you are digging up a plant from outdoors to bring in, get rid of as much of the soil around the roots as you can. Not only is garden soil too heavy and thick for indoor plants, but it is likely to contain bugs and pests that will be very happy to be brought into your home.

TIP: Some plants will really appreciate a dose of fertilizer every so often during the growing season – with **tomatoes** (see page 142), for example, it's pretty much essential to get the most out of your crop. Buy organic if you can – liquid kelp and fish fertilizer is a good general one (if somewhat smelly). You could also try using coffee grounds on your tomatoes and other acid-loving plants. Resist the temptation to over-fertilize, though, as you may 'burn' the roots.

Time for a drink

If you are gardening outside, this would be less of a consideration, but the windowsill gardener needs to water smart. First, where is the water going to go when it drains through the pot at watering time? Ideally, you want a container that has holes in the bottom inside another container that doesn't. This lessens the consequences of accidental overwatering, meaning the plant doesn't sit in wet soil for a long time, which can result in rot and sad, yellow leaves. But when that water does drain through you need something to catch it, so you don't get soil and water all over your lovely windowsill, table or bookshelf.

A container with holes in also gives you the option to water from the bottom by briefly immersing the lower part of the pot in a sink full of water, letting it soak up into the soil. This can be a really handy technique for watering delicate shoots and seedlings.

If you have an amazing pot that you can't make holes in or rest another pot inside, it's still often worth a shot.

Some fine gravel or even charcoal in the bottom can provide space for drainage and aid aeration. If it's not happening, you'll know for next time.

The best time to water is in the morning or the evening as plants generally don't want their wet leaves exposed to direct sun. Seedlings tend to flourish best in a more humid environment and enjoy misting (established plants will appreciate this, too, if the weather is very warm and dry); a tray of almost-there **rocket/arugula** (see page 62), for example, will like to be gently watered from above from a watering can with a rose attachment so as not to upset the roots, and full-grown plants and herbs usually like to have only their roots watered.



Get to know your plants

There is an indication for each plant in this book as to how much water it requires, but don't forget that it can depend on a lot of other factors, such as where the plant is, how much sun it gets, what time of year it is (lots of plants require less water in the winter months) and even what sort of pot it's in – a large plastic pot will be able to retain more water than a small terracotta one. Some plants like to dry out completely, whereas others need regular watering. So the best thing to do is get to know your plants; look at them every day and you'll learn how to spot that they are not happy with the amount of water you are giving them (and remember that too much can be just as much of a problem as too little).

We all have the best of intentions to care for our leafy friends responsibly but it's still easy to occasionally forget. A good way to remember is to build five minutes of gardening into your daily routine. How about walking around the house with a spray mister and a watering can while you're waiting for your morning

coffee to brew? Or making a point of checking on your charges every evening after dinner? And be careful of putting a pot in an out-of-the-way spot you are likely to forget about – after all, out of sight, out of mind.

PESTS

You don't want to share your windowsill harvest with anyone you haven't invited round, but occasionally it will happen and you'll get a visit from an aphid crew. First, move the plant away from any unaffected neighbours and remove any heavily infected leaves. Then, fill a mister bottle with lukewarm water and a squirt of liquid soap and spray the top and underside of the leaves of the affected plant every day until your unwelcome guests get the message.

Many herbs actually make good insect repellents, too. You can use them before an infestation gets out of hand or to prevent a recurrence. Either fresh or dried, or infused in a tea for spraying, chamomile, chives, coriander/cilantro, dill, fennel, feverfew, garlic, lavender, pennyroyal, rosemary and tansy all drive away pests.



DISEASE

Plants that live inside can be susceptible to mould and fungal infections. Making sure there's enough airflow around them and they are not over-watered is the best way to prevent this. If it happens, move the plant well away from any others and outside for a couple of days if you can. A popular home remedy for mould is to crush a garlic clove into a cup of water, leave it to stand for fifteen minutes and then pour it into your mister bottle to spray on the affected plant.

SPACE TO BREATHE

Just like people, plants need room to breathe. Other than those that you will be harvesting very young – such as with **pea shoots** (see page 32) or **microgreens** (see page 26) – plants that are crammed in too tightly will rarely do well. Most plants also really appreciate a gentle breeze. If it's freezing cold outside you won't want to have all the windows open, but your edibles in particular will need some airflow. As well as causing



mould and mildew, a lack of air often results in rotting seedlings or seeds that aren't germinating. Some edibles usually grown outdoors are actually toughened up by a bit of a crosswind – if your **rainbow chard** (see page 59) is growing up a bit spindly, for example, it might be missing the buffeting around it would get from a good breeze and you could try giving it a couple of hours in a room with a gentle fan.

Pots, pots and more pots

Sure, you can go to your local hardware store or nursery and get lots of brown plastic pots – and purpose-made containers like this do have their uses – but this is where you can get creative. In fact, after filling your home with greenery, some of which you can eat, this is probably the next most fun part of being a windowsill gardener. There are two main practical considerations when choosing a home for your plants: drainage (which we've talked about above) and depth. Some plants that are still suitable for indoor

growing have a fairly long central or 'tap' root and will need some depth (we're looking at you, **fennel** – see page 127). Others, such as **microgreens** (see page 26), need but a few centimetres (an inch). But, other than that, get ready to use your imagination!

- ☛ Start by looking around your kitchen – what do you have that you're not using? For example, pretty glasses and jars are great for starting cuttings and regrowing **celery** (see page 47) and **lettuce** (see page 53), and a big roasting tin could be repurposed as a tray for **pea shoots** (see page 32).
- ☛ Why not check out the local goodwill or charity shop? Old copper pans, unusual jugs and even metal buckets can become eye-catching containers.
- ☛ Start thinking twice before you throw anything away. Plastic food trays can be perfect for starting off seedlings and tin cans with the label removed look great with herbs planted in them. Cut the bottom off a drinks bottle and punch holes in the base to make a recycled plant pot. This can then be hidden in a tea pot or other ceramic pot without drainage holes.

- ☛ If you know anyone who works in a restaurant, ask them if they can get their hands on any cool containers. Olive oil cans often carry an attractive, distinctive design and catering-sized tins can be a good home for a larger plant, such as an **avocado** tree (see page 130). You can use a metal punch or screwdriver and a hammer to make drainage holes. **Chilli** (see page 97) plants look great growing in small coffee bags.
- ☛ Want your plants to perfectly match your décor? Next time you're at the DIY store, grab some terracotta pots and some paint samples. You could even use masking tape and a couple of different colours to create your own two-tone designs. (Make sure you only paint the outside of the pot – and this is best used only for pots housing plants you aren't going to eat, as the paint chemicals could get into the soil.)
- ☛ And it's not just pots that can be recycled from things you have at home – an empty spray bottle (that contained something non-toxic, such as olive oil) can be thoroughly cleaned to become a mister and a clear plastic bag is the perfect greenhouse hack if your shoots are struggling to germinate in some dry or chilly air.

HOMEMADE POTS FOR BABY PLANTS

Some plants can be grown easily from seed indoors but don't really like being handled too much. If you plant them in a biodegradable pot they are easy to 'pot up' without disturbing their roots when they reach a size where they need a bigger home - **chillies** (see page 97) and **coriander/cilantro** (see page 124) are examples of this. One method is to plant a seed or two in an eggshell filled with compost. They look really cute sitting in an egg box and the shell can just be squashed and cracked slightly when the time comes to pot up. Alternatively, to make a pot from newspaper:

- ☛ Take a full sheet of black and white newspaper. (Coloured print is best avoided due to the chemicals in the ink.)
- ☛ Fold the paper to form a long, narrow strip.
- ☛ Lay a small cylindrical glass about half the width of the paper on its side on one end of the strip, then roll the paper around the jar, tucking the overhanging edge into the open end of the glass. Don't worry about making it neat.



- 🍃 Squash and crumple the paper around the glass until the shape feels fairly secure, then slide out the glass.
- 🍃 Turn the glass around and push the bottom into the newspaper cup to squash and flatten its folded base.
- 🍃 Pull out the glass and fill the paper with compost – this will help it hold its shape. Stand it in a dish to give it some support when you plant your seeds.
- 🍃 When your seedling is big enough, just pop the whole thing in a pot of compost and plant as normal. The newspaper will quickly break down and your seedling's delicate roots will be undisturbed.

TIP: This might sound obvious, but any chemicals in the soil, container or in any fertilizers you add to your plants can get into the leaves. You'll no doubt want your windowsill garden to be as natural and organic as possible, so it's worth keeping this in mind.