

# Gardening for Renters

Many of us rent the homes we live in, especially in and around urban centres. Renting can present specific barriers to growing food, especially when the possibility of eviction is present. Housing uncertainty can often coincide with or contribute to food insecurity, both on an individual and collective level.

Even for tenants who have secure housing, gardening methods which modify the property require cooperation from the landlord or management company, which is not always an option. So when renting, there can be many obstacles to putting down roots. However, it is possible for many people who rent to grow foods and medicines, and compost their plant wastes at home. Here are some tips for creating a garden as a tenant.

## Grow in the Ground

If your landlord is open to it, gardening directly in the earth is the way to go. If pre-existing garden beds are available to you, using them will be the simplest way to grow plants, especially if the previous growers took good care of the soil. It's great to be able to tap into a stable soil ecosystem that's suited to the environmental conditions of your space. Alternatively, try asking if you can convert a patch of grass into garden soil (*for more on this, see factsheet # 7— Mulching*). It's a good idea to get any agreements with your landlord around gardening in writing, so all parties have something concrete to refer to when necessary.

## Grow in Containers

For many tenants, planting directly in the earth or building raised beds is not an option, but many garden plants can be grown in containers! Containers can be made from freely salvaged or cheaply acquired materials. Buckets, large pots, baskets, wooden crates, or burlap sacks can all be repurposed into growing containers—just make sure they are appropriately sized for your plants and allow water to drain out the bottom. Soil in different containers will dry out at different rates, so it might take some experimentation to figure out your plants' watering needs. See *factsheet #20—Sub-irrigated Bucket Planters*, or *#22—Container Gardening for more specifics*.



### Benefits of container gardening:

1. Containers don't require you to modify the landscape of the property
2. They can be placed higher than ground-level, which can improve physical accessibility
3. If you have to move, you may be able to bring plants with you to your next place, or gift them to neighbours
4. Many garden plants are bred specifically with container growing in mind. Check seed catalogues or talk to local growers to find out which!
5. Plants that aren't in contact with the earth may be less susceptible to certain soil-borne pests and diseases. In the case of plant disease, the soil in a container may be replaced and the container cleaned if necessary.
6. Containers don't require a much of a yard. A patio, a balcony railing, the edge of a staircase, the side of a walkway, or even a flat accessible rooftop could all be candidates for container locations!
7. A container can keep aggressive spreaders like mint under control, so they don't affect the rest of the yard

## Annuals and Perennials

*Annual plants* are plants which grow for one season, are harvested, then need to be replanted for the next crop.

*Perennial plants* do not require replanting each season. Some take one year or more to get established before producing crops, but then they provide year after year.

Even if you have permission to plant directly into the soil in your yard, you may not want to invest resources into lots of slow-growing, long-lived plants in case you need to move unexpectedly. Growing some annuals can ensure you're getting the most out of your garden in the event that you have to relocate, or if you're gardening on a fixed-term tenancy.

Don't be discouraged out of planting perennials if that's what you're drawn to, however. Many perennials are able to be propagated by divisions or cuttings, which means if your next place has a garden, you might be able to bring some of your favourite plants with you. But there's also nothing wrong with leaving a plant that you enjoyed for the next tenant to enjoy, too! Perennials growing in place continuously also aid soil stability. Their roots prevent erosion, nutrient leakage, and disturbance to soil organisms, while also keeping carbon stored underground long term. So they're a great addition to the garden if your circumstances allow. Many also provide crops the same year they're planted — see the table below:

### Examples of annual food plants:

Tomatoes  
Peppers  
Peas  
Beans  
Squash  
Cucumbers  
Beets  
Carrots  
Most Brassicas (Cauliflower, Cabbage, Broccoli, Annual kale, Gai Lan, etc)

### Perennials which can often be harvested the same year they're planted:

Perennial kale  
Sorrel  
Mint-family herbs (oregano, thyme, sage etc)  
Egyptian onions  
Stinging nettle  
Skirret (carrot family plant with edible leaves and roots)  
Hablitzia (a vining vegetable with leaves similar to spinach)  
Everbearing raspberries

### Perennials which seldom or never provide crops the first year:

Rhubarb  
Most *Rubus* berries (most raspberries, blackberries, salmonberries, etc)  
Strawberries  
Blueberries  
Asparagus  
Artichoke  
Grapes  
Fruit trees

## Non-spreading plants

If your landlord expects you to leave the property as you found it, you might want to avoid growing plants which have the potential to take over a lot of space on their own, or become difficult to remove once established. As a general recommendation, bamboo, hops, and many mint family plants (spearmint, bee balm, lamb's ear, etc), are all best avoided if spreading is a concern, as these can be difficult or impossible to fully remove once established in the soil. And as is important in any garden, plants which are invasive to your area should be avoided altogether. The good news is that the vast majority of cultivated fruit and veggie crops are non-invasive, and are unlikely to spread out of control.

For important info on invasive garden plants in B.C., visit: <https://bcinvasives.ca/play-your-part/plantwise/>

## Save seeds, share seeds

Seed-saving has been an important part of robust food systems for as long as people have been planting their own crops. Saving seeds connects us to the foods and medicines we grow, and sharing them with your neighbours is a time-tested way to contribute to empowered and connected communities. Saving seeds also allows plants to adapt over generations, leading to better pest resistance and genetic resilience in a changing climate. This is why the practice is a key part of building collective food security. *To learn more about saving seeds, connect with the Victoria Seed Library. Also see BioDiversity zine, issue #3*



## Boulevard gardening

Many local streets feature beautiful gardens between the curbs and the sidewalks. These are called boulevard gardens. Within the City of Victoria, public boulevards are typically covered in grass, but residents can convert them into gardens, and you don't necessarily need to be a homeowner to do so. All that is needed is permission from the owner of the adjacent property, and confirmation from the City that your plan won't disturb any underground utilities. If you live outside the City of Victoria, do some research into your local regulations and guidelines. Many other cities and municipalities also encourage boulevard gardening.

If your landlord or property manager does not permit a boulevard garden to be grown in front of the property, talk to your neighbours! Many people love seeing the grass in front of their homes transformed into dynamic, biodiverse sites of food security, community building, and ecological stewardship.

*If you have questions about boulevard gardening in Victoria, send an email to [vicboulevardgardens@gmail.com](mailto:vicboulevardgardens@gmail.com)*



Cardboard, manure, and leaves can turn a strip of grass into rich soil! For step-by-step instructions on how to convert grass into a garden, see *Factsheet #7 - Mulching*. Contact us if you have questions about sourcing these materials.

If you are boulevard gardening within the City of Victoria, make sure to read and observe the [Boulevard Gardening Guidelines](#): Visit [www.victoria.ca](http://www.victoria.ca), then click *Residents > Parks > Growing in the City > Boulevard Gardening*

The guidelines cover things like pesticide use, sidewalk accessibility, working around existing trees, etc. Within these parameters there is quite a bit of freedom in the design of the garden and the types of plants you can grow.

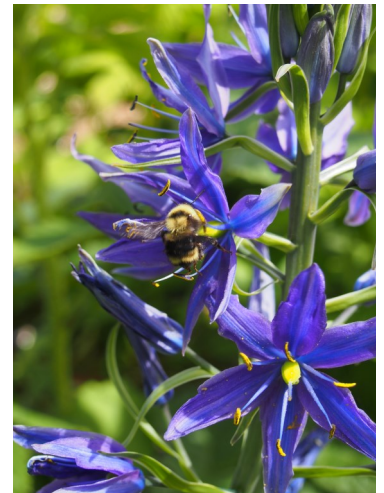
## Native plants

*For more, see factsheet #15 - Pollinator Stewardship*

Many of us live in urban settings, where there is often a lack of food and habitat for native pollinators like bees, butterflies, hummingbirds and beetles. Fragmentation of habitat, displacement by introduced plants, and pesticide use have all lead to a decline in native biodiversity. Many native bee populations are also threatened by competition and diseases that honey bee farms introduce. Gardening with native plants can support native pollinators, who have important relationships with many foods and medicines. They play a key role in biodiversity and equitable food systems (and deserve to thrive in their own right!).

Many native plants are adapted to live on rainfall alone, so choose species wisely for your soil type and you can create a garden requiring less water input.

If you are not Indigenous to the lands you garden on, find out from local native plant stewards how you can source native plants in a responsible and culturally appropriate way. The practice of removing native plants from their habitat without proper consent causes harms to Indigenous ecologies and foodways.



## Think vertical

Space is a consideration for most gardeners, and especially for the many renters who have a small footprint to work with. Growing plants like tomatoes, beans, squash, and vining flowers vertically on trellises can help make the most out of the area you have. Trellises can be constructed from many different repurposed materials, including wooden stakes, bamboo poles, PVC pipes, steel rods, or old fencing, held together with wire, twine, or clamps. Trellises have benefits other than space saving: they can help provide shade to the plants in your garden that can't handle full sun, and they can provide a perch for birds.

## Indoor composting

Those of us who rent often don't have access to outdoor composting where we live. If you can't convince your landlord to allow a backyard compost bin, or if you don't have the funds or balcony space for a tumbler composter (see factsheet #9—*Tumbler Composters*), there are still ways to recycle your organic wastes into nutritious compost. The following methods work great if you have an unoccupied space like a laundry room or basement, but with some care and attention can even be integrated into living spaces without any odour problems.

**Worm composting** is a great way to recycle food scraps, and it can be done indoors without producing odours. As of writing, we have 7 worm bins inside the CEC office and we rarely smell anything! Fruit flies can sometimes arise, but freezing your food scraps before feeding will kill any fly eggs present in the skins of your produce. Freezing has the added benefit of preventing odours while you accumulate scraps between feedings, and can help speed up decomposition by breaking plant cell walls. Covering the air holes with mesh, keeping your bin lidded, and burying food scraps deeply will also go a long way to preventing pest issues.

See factsheet #2 - *Vermicomposting, for details on how to set up and maintain a worm composting bin*

**Compost tubs** are a slightly more advanced form of indoor composting, recommended for those who have some prior composting experience. A lidded bin can be repurposed with a few drainage and aeration holes. Create a shallow base layer of dry dirt (old potting soil from houseplants works) and carbon-rich material like shredded newspaper or dry leaves. As you add to the bin, alternate dry carbon-rich layers with layers of chopped up fruit and vegetable scraps (avoid animal products and cooked foods). If done properly, you'll have a compost bin with little to no odour, but it will require monitoring to maintain proper moisture levels and a balance of materials. In general, the microbes which produce foul odours thrive in soggy, low-oxygen environments. Keeping your bin aerated is key; gently fluff it regularly to prevent compaction, add newspaper if it gets soggy, and include materials like crunchy leaves or straw which provide air pockets. As it gets full, sift the finished compost into a second bin. And don't be concerned if you see white bugs called springtails, they're very helpful and harmless decomposers!

**Bokashi fermentation** is not technically a form of composting, but it is a way to process and store food scraps until they can be added to compost or trenched into soil. One benefit is that bokashi can process many foods that a traditional compost bin can't. It uses a bucket or container and bran inoculated with microbes that ferment organic wastes. If you have a bokashi bin in your home, you will still need a way to compost or bury the finished product, as it won't be fully decomposed and shouldn't be added to plants directly. You may need to make an arrangement with a friend who can compost your ferments for you a few times per year.

See factsheet #10 - *Bokashi*

As of 2015, kitchen scraps are banned from the CRD's Hartland landfill. If you live in a multi-family building in the CRD that does not have dedicated organics disposal talk to your property manager, as they are responsible for arranging collection services with a waste hauling company. If the property manager doesn't take action, you may need contact the waste hauling company, as the haulers are responsible for observing the ban and can be fined under CRD bylaw if they are found to be disposing of large amounts of compostable matter. (more info can be found at [crd.bc.ca/service/waste-recycling](http://crd.bc.ca/service/waste-recycling)) See our factsheet: *Multi-Family Residential Composting Options*.

If you have concerns about your rights as a tenant, your local tenants' rights organizations may be able to help you out.



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