

## **Tips for Urban Gardeners**

by Amy Souza

Around the world - especially in developing nations - urban agriculture is a matter of survival. Farms and gardens within and just outside of major cities provide vegetables, milk, and livestock for the population. In small home gardens or vacant lots, many poorer city dwellers grow their own food, thus enhancing their own food security.

In this country, fruit and vegetables are abundant, but much of it grows far from where we live. USDA research shows that the average distance a vegetable travels from the fields to the dinner table is 1,500 miles. Not only does produce lose much of its flavor before it gets to you, it also loses many nutrients.

When you live in an urban area, or even the suburbs, it's easy to forget where food comes from. Most Americans now live in cities, and as we become more disconnected from the land and the people who grow our food, we lose a sense of food's value. With its poor soil and dirty air, the city might seem like the last place to plant anything. But with a few tricks, city dwellers can grow a bountiful harvest.

### **Raise Your Beds**

Because space is at a premium, using intensive growing methods like raised beds or succession planting makes sense. You can also take advantage of vertical growing techniques for both vegetables and flowers. Learn all about climbers from our Innovative Gardener.

### **Keep the Weeds Down**

Mulching and keeping weeds at bay helps conserve water, a definite plus during this drought year. Check out our guides to mulching and water-wise gardening for expert tips.

### **Try a Community Garden**

Community gardens exist in many urban areas, providing bits of green space amid the concrete and allowing city dwellers to reap the benefits of their labor. For a small fee, you can rent a plot for the season, and can grow whatever vegetables and annual flowers you'd like. Community gardens usually provide everything you need: garden tools, water, even expert advice! Many gardens also participate in community programs, such as Plant a Row for the Hungry.

### **Amend Your Soil**

City soil is often compacted and may contain pollutants from car exhaust and industrial waste. It's a good idea to have soil tested before planting anything and to add organic matter, like compost, to your garden plot. You may also need to add sand for drainage. Most community gardens already have fertile soil from past growing seasons, as well as experts on hand to help you figure out what soil amendments are best for your plot. Check out our How-To Bulletin, Building Healthy Soil, for more information.

### **Support Your Local Urban Farmer**

Within city limits, many small farmers raise niche crops, those that don't require acres and acres of land. Look for these products--like honey or wheat grass--at your corner store or farmer's market. Encourage stores in town to carry products grown and produced by locals.

### **Plant a Pot of Flowers**

If you don't want to undertake an entire garden, plant some flowers! Every yard, porch, or stoop can benefit from a pot of pansies or petunias. Or, brighten a shady area with coleus or impatiens. Self-watering planters, soil amendments, and water-absorbing polymers can help keep your flowers healthy through heat and drought conditions.

### **For More Information**

For information about urban agriculture in North America and around the world, visit City Farmer, a comprehensive web site maintained by Canada's Office of Urban Agriculture.

For more information about urban gardening, or other articles like this one, visit <http://www.gardeners.com>