



# Virginia Cooperative Extension

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## Balcony Gardening Basics

If you have a balcony, you can garden. Whether you want to add color with flowers and foliage, create a little privacy, or you want to grow edibles and native plants, you can transform your balcony from a concrete jungle into a miniature garden.

### **Check the Rules**

Start by checking with your condo association or apartment manager to find out what's allowed. You may need to limit your design elements to the height of the balcony railing or to items that aren't attached to the building.

Most building safety codes require balconies to support 60 pounds per square foot. This will support most balcony gardens. If weight is a concern, stick to smaller pots and choose plastic containers rather than clay or ceramic.

### **Evaluate your balcony's microclimate:**

Some parts of the balcony may be in the sun all day. Other parts may not receive any direct sunlight at all. Over the course of the next sunny day, pay attention to which parts of the balcony are in the sun. An easy way to do this is to take a photo every hour or two from sunrise until sunset. (If you don't have a camera handy, you can also make a quick sketch to show what time the sun reaches which part of the balcony.) This will help you to track how much sun each area receives and for how long. You may need to adjust for seasonal changes in sunlight patterns.

Does the wind buffet your balcony? You may need to position your plants in a more sheltered part of the balcony or install a wind screen.

### **Decide what to plant:**

Pick the right plant for your balcony. If your balcony is in direct sun all day, pick plants that like sun. If your balcony stays in shadow, pick shade lovers! Read the tag to see how much sun and water a plant needs, then put plants that like the same conditions together: (sun worshippers with sun lovers, water lovers with water lovers, etc.) Compact varieties tend to do well in containers.

Use the "Thriller, Spiller, Filler" recipe: Put a showy upright plant in the center of your container to add height. Use trailing plants that spill over the side to create a lush feel and add bushy, medium-height plants to fill in the center.

Consider mixing your favorite flowers with native plants (Native Plants for Northern Virginia [www.novaregion.org/DocumentCenter/View/10615](http://www.novaregion.org/DocumentCenter/View/10615)).

### **What goes where?**

How your balcony will look from inside matters as much as how it looks when you are outside. Position your favorite plants so that you can enjoy them from inside as well. A couple of well-

placed evergreens or a flowering vine growing on a trellis can help create a visual barrier between you and your neighbor or help to mitigate an unsightly view.

Think vertically to maximize the space you have! You may be able to hang plants from hooks, use flower boxes on the balcony railings, create towers and put containers on the balcony floor.

### **Planting Tips**

Select a container that is large enough for the plant's roots. Make sure the container has a drainage hole so the roots won't sit in water. Start with a clean container. Place fresh potting soil loosely in the container so that the water can drain through and the roots will have access to air space in the soil. Using fresh commercial potting soil will give plants 8-10 weeks of nutrients while minimizing problems with insects, diseases and weeds. You may need to fertilize your balcony garden after a couple of months. Be sure to follow the package directions as too much fertilizer will harm the plants.

Balcony plants tend to dry out quickly, especially if they are in full sun or exposed to the wind. On hot summer days, you may need to water twice a day. Test the soil by sticking a finger in the dirt down to the second knuckle. If it feels dry, add water until it starts to come out the bottom. You may need to use a saucer under your container to keep the water from running onto your neighbor's balcony. After a few minutes, discard any water left in the saucer to keep excess salt from building up in the container, and to discourage the growth of mosquito larvae.

### **Sources:**

- Balcony Gardens, Prepared by Virginia Nathan, Extension Technician, Consumer Horticulture, Virginia Tech [http://www.milmont.com/\\_ccLib/image/articles/PDF-154.pdf](http://www.milmont.com/_ccLib/image/articles/PDF-154.pdf)
- Four Keys to Successful Container Gardening, Prepared by Diane Relf, Extension Specialist, Environmental Horticulture [http://www.milmont.com/\\_ccLib/image/articles/PDF-157.pdf](http://www.milmont.com/_ccLib/image/articles/PDF-157.pdf)
- How to Create a Container Garden for Edibles in the North Carolina Piedmont Prepared by Kim Richter, Dept. of Horticultural Science; Lucy Bradley, Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist, Dept. of Horticultural Science; Mark Kistler, Assistant Professor, Dept. of Agricultural and Extension Education; Julie Sherk, Assistant Professor, Dept of Horticultural Science; Published by North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service [http://www.nccgp.org/images/uploads/resource\\_files/ContainerGardeningforEdibles\\_NCPiedmont.pdf](http://www.nccgp.org/images/uploads/resource_files/ContainerGardeningforEdibles_NCPiedmont.pdf)
- Successful Container Gardening Prepared by Kathleen Wisser, Extension Master Gardener, Terry A. Garwood, Extension Agent, Agriculture & Natural Resources Published by North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service <https://surry.ces.ncsu.edu/files/library/86/containergardenpub.pdf>
- **For more information contact our VCE Horticulture Help Desk at 703 228 6414 or by email at [mgarlalex@gmail.com](mailto:mgarlalex@gmail.com) or visit the website of the Master Gardeners of Northern Virginia [www.mgnv.org](http://www.mgnv.org)**

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