

Bay-Friendly Gardening is flexible.

There's no one style or right way to go about it. In this chapter a few different approaches to gardening are discussed, including gardening as a renter, community gardening, container gardening and hiring a landscape professional.

Breaking Ground

If you are a renter and your landlord is open to letting you garden, then dig right in. Here are a few words of advice.

Keep the lines of communication open. Even if your landlord is a bit laissez-faire, keep him or her informed about what you're up to. Invite him to come by from time to time to see what the place looks like. If she likes what you're doing, you may be able to negotiate a reduction in rent or reimbursement for the cost of plants. At the very least, you'll prevent any misunderstandings.

Grow annuals. It's easy to sneak a few annuals into most garden beds and foundation plantings and, since they'll bloom and die in a single year, you can return the garden to its prior state, leaving no lasting traces of your activity.

Put in perennials that you can take out again. All bulbs, corms, and rhizomes — such as iris, gladiolas, and the like — are good bets for the renter, since they divide easily and travel well. Plants like yarrow, which have matting, fleshy root systems, are also easy to put in and take out as required by circumstance.

Moving the Ground Around

Growing plants in pots is a great option for renters — so good, in fact, that it gets a separate section. (See page 77.)

Finding Common Ground

The late Karl Linn, a Berkeley resident who founded community gardens across the US, made the argument that community gardens are more than gardens — they are neighborhood commons. The commons, Linn said are the “shared natural environments” of air, water, and land. Both community gardens and community restoration sites offer all people access to these fundamental elements.

Sign up for a plot at a community garden. As a renter, you have the freedom to at least consider moving close to a community garden. Turnover can be fairly quick, so it's possible to get a plot within six months to a year. To find the one closest to you, look online or call your town's Parks and Recreation Department.

Start a community garden. The website of the American Community Gardening Association warns that starting a community garden is not a quick process, but it can be done. Linn said “start with the land bank of the city” — work with a public agency that administers land. “It is never secure,” he said, “to start a garden on private land. Then form a group that wants to create and use the garden. Either they come to you, or you can attract them by drawing attention to the land.”



Carole Bennett-Simmons, one of the founders of Peralta Community Garden in north Berkeley, says it's good to start a garden next to a place where people don't have land. Apartment dwellers, she says, are "automatic customers." Beyond that, she suggests looking for a place with a nice open sky.

Help care for a school garden. Many schools have or would like to start a garden, and all of them are likely to welcome help. Put out feelers at the school nearest to your home, or talk to teachers you know.

Join a community stewardship group. In spite of so much urban development, the Bay Area has a surprising number of wild nooks and crannies, and an ever-increasing number of people are joining together to care for them. There are 20 creek groups in Alameda and Contra Costa County, for example, and each one of them offers opportunities to pull weeds, grow seeds, and plant plants. Many parks have "Friends" groups that would welcome your inquiries; some high schools have environmental clubs that might provide a way for you to connect with nature and with other people. The benefits of participating in the activities of such groups are many; the results can truly change your life.



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Container Gardening

Whether you live in an apartment or have a big backyard, containers offer great versatility. Plants can be moved from place to place, and the gardener can compose ever-changing tableaux of color, placement, and seasonality. The downside of containers is that you can't neglect them for too long without dire consequences. Don Mahoney, horticulture manager for the Strybing Arboretum Society in San Francisco, has the following advice for container gardeners.

Container gardening doesn't have to be a short-term proposition. Bonsai trees, the ultimate container plant, can live for 400 years. Manzanitas can be grown in pots for a dozen years or more. Instead of this year's impatiens, grow longer-lived plants in containers, ones that will last at least a few years.

Soil and water should be seen as a team. In a hot area, inland, you'll have to water more — or use a heavier soil mix. In the fog belts of San Francisco and Berkeley, where there's so much moisture in the air, a mix that has more sand or perlite will be required. Gardeners who water their container plants often will also want a soil mix that drains well. If you want to conserve water, it's perfectly easy to do so; use a heavier soil in the mix — you can even include a bit of garden clay — or use very drought-tolerant plants, such as succulents.

Start with the right soil mix. The best potting soil is not one brand but the right mix of



ingredients for your location, your watering habits, and the plants you want to grow. You will need a component that ensures good drainage — such as sand — and an element that will hold moisture, such as compost.

Plant singly. Mahoney keeps a lot of his treasure plants alone in a pot, so he can keep an eye on them. Caring for these individuals is easy, as each plant can be matched to the appropriate soil, sun, and watering regime.

Or plant in combination. For that filled-in and bountiful look, put a lot of plants in a single pot.

When you do this, make sure all the plants take the same culture. One approach is to sort the plants by their place of origin. Mahoney has containers of all South African plants, all California natives, and a grouping of "true Mediterraneans" — rosemary, lavender, and thyme.

Have fun with the combinations. Mix and match summer plants. Play with combinations of deciduous and evergreen. Mahoney has a Japanese maple in a pot that's underplanted with California

Tip: Maximize Impact with Large Pots



Bay-Friendly Qualified Professional Michelle Derviss likes to avoid wasting potting soil when planting shallow rooting plants such as bromeliads in very large pots. She suggests filling an old burlap bag or pillow case with packing peanuts to fill the volume of the pot. "By enclosing the peanuts in a bag or pillow case a lot of mess can be avoided when it comes time to empty out and freshen up the pot."

polypody (a native fern). In the fall and winter, when the maple is bare, the fern grows up and fills in the picture. In the summer, when the tree leafs out, the fern goes dormant. Similarly, Mahoney raises a lot of California wildflowers from seed and each spring transplants them into pots that are also home to more permanent woody species.

Keep your container plants happy year after year. After two or three years, add three to four inches more soil to the top of the pot or, better yet, to the bottom. Amend pots with a couple handfuls of homemade compost before the rainy season begins each year, and the rain will work the nutrients down into the soil.



Tip: Add Worm Castings to the Mix

Topdress your container plants with worm castings — this balanced, nutrient-rich amendment will really give your potted plants something to grow on. Unlike other fresh manures, worm castings will not burn plants. They are also rich in beneficial organisms, so, when adding worm castings to potting soil, you are inoculating the soil with new life.

Creative Container Gardening

Be creative with what you use for a container. Even a junk car turned into a planter box can add style to a garden. Granted, most people aren't up for using an old car, but there are plenty of other objects that can be used as containers. You can stroll thrift stores for interesting finds or repurpose something from your garage—just about anything that can hold soil and let water drain will do the job.



Making a Pallet-Tainer

Pallets are one commonly disposed of item that can be transformed into a planter. Since they can be mounted to a wall they take up a minimal amount

of horizontal space, which makes them perfect for small gardens and balconies. Anyone who knows how to use a staple gun can build their own



pallet garden. What you'll need to get started: recycled pallet, staple gun, landscape fabric, potting soil, plant starts.

First, place a pallet face down on the ground and staple landscape fabric onto its bottom, back and sides. Flip the pallet over so that it is lying on its back and fill it with potting soil, and then plant starts in the gaps in between boards on the front and on top. It's a good idea to keep the pallet on the ground for a couple of weeks (if you can wait that long) so that the plant's roots can grow and help stabilize the potting soil. Once the plants are well established carefully tip the container garden up and securely connect it to a wall.