



Clockwise from far left: Summer bounty from *Growing Your Own Food in Hong Kong*; Kids gardening at Rooftop Republic; Seedlings; Rooftop Republic

Green Fingers

Many of us in Hong Kong aren't lucky enough to have a garden, but that doesn't mean your children can't be exposed to gardening. *Karen Sherwood* suggests some ways kids can get their hands muddy

Kids love to try their hand at gardening. Getting dirty, digging holes, stealing the odd tomato from grandpa's veggie patch – it all makes for good outdoor fun. Gardening in Hong Kong, though, can be somewhat different. A typhoon-soaked concrete balcony is certainly less inspiring than the gardens portrayed in most books about gardening with children. It's still possible to get your little ones involved in the magic of growing their own food, however, you just need to work with Hong Kong's conditions.

Michelle Hong is a co-founder of Rooftop Republic Urban Farming, a social enterprise aimed at transforming the relationship people have with their food. Michelle and her colleagues have established organic vegetable gardens on rooftops and balconies throughout Hong Kong, and run a variety of programmes and workshops. Michelle recommends microgreens as a great first foray into growing your own food. Traditionally grown on a windowsill and used as a garnish, these seedlings pack a big nutritional punch for their

size. Michelle sees them as a great indoor starter project for kids as "you don't need too much space or light, you can use soil or paper, and you can harvest between 14 days to a month after sowing." There are particular seeds marketed as microgreens, but you can try many other vegetables too. "Broccoli, bak choi, cress, radishes even – it just depends on the kind of taste you want." There are lots of creative suggestions online for growing your microgreens – Michelle suggests recycling egg cartons as planting trays.

If you have some outdoor space and want to move on from microgreens, then it's important to first understand the Hong Kong seasons. Michelle explains "we don't really split it into the four seasons in Hong Kong, we would just go with the warm season and the cool season. The cool season would be October to March and the warm would be April to September, though of course these are just guidelines. You need to

bear the seasons in mind when selecting what to plant and when to plant it – guidance produced in other countries may need re-interpreting for Hong Kong.

Herbs require less container space and less care than vegetables, so they could be considered step two in your edible garden progression. Michelle suggests that good herbs for beginners to try growing in the cool season include mint, oregano, coriander and parsley. Basil is a great one to sow in the warm season. Get the kids sniffing and tasting the herbs – it's amazing what they'll try if they grew it themselves.

Herbs and vegetables will generally require at least four to six hours of sunlight each day. Mint is one of the few edible items that can cope with less light – meaning you can also attempt it indoors. It's also hardy enough to survive even the most novice gardener. 'Fruity veggies' like aubergines and tomatoes need full sun for most of the day, so you'll need to observe your planting area to determine if this is possible. All herbs and veggies will need watering twice a day in summer, in the morning and in the evening.

Growing vegetables requires a bit more space and effort than herbs. It's possible to get allotment spaces in Hong



Photo Credit: Growing Your Own Food in Hong Kong; Rooftop Republic; Xaume Ollerros

Kong, but container gardening is more practical for many people. The planter size recommended by Michelle is 1m x 1m with a soil depth of 40cms. In his highly recommended and beautifully written book *Growing Your Own Food in Hong Kong*, Arthur Van Langenberg provides lots of examples of growing single vegetables in smaller pots. Many seed companies produce vegetable varieties specifically for container growing, so check the recommended container size on the seed packet too – you may be pleasantly surprised! Drainage is extremely important in our climate, so if you are going to get creative with your containers (we've all seen re-purposed oil drums, sinks and buckets!) do make sure you drill plenty of holes in the base. Michelle cautions against using the polystyrene crates that are often seen as planters in Hong Kong, as the soil may be contaminated when the polystyrene heats up in the sun.

Growing in containers need not limit your variety. "For the cool season, the kind of veggies we'd suggest for beginners are lettuces, radishes, kale and cherry tomatoes." If you are planting in the warm season Michelle suggests "beans, sweet potatoes, water spinach/morning glory, Ceylon spinach,

amaranth, cucumbers and aubergines. The fruity ones like tomatoes, aubergines and cucumbers will tend to be more high maintenance. The easier ones are the leafy greens." Higher maintenance vegetables are those that will require pruning and fertilizing at specific times to ensure they produce fruit and not just thicker foliage. Most gardening resources can provide details on fertilizer/ pruning requirements for each vegetable – it's important to do your research on your chosen variety.

Seeds can be sown directly into outside containers, but Michelle's recommendation "would be to nurture them in a seedling tray or small pot in a controlled environment first, somewhere you can protect them from rain, or too much sun, and from birds. Birds really love the baby leaves!" If you have left-over seeds keep them in their packet and store them in an airtight bag. Putting them in a fridge can help to extend their shelf life. Or consider swapping seeds with a friend. Another top tip from Michelle is to ensure that little hands (or big ones) don't touch any seeds you intend to store, to avoid the risk of contamination.



Mongkok's Flower Market is the best place to source seeds in Hong Kong. You should also be able to get advice on fertilizers and soil for container-grown vegetables. You don't necessarily need to replace all the soil in your containers after every crop, but it's very important to understand that nutrients have been

lost and will need replacing. Topping up the container with compost, and using fertilizers will help, but Michelle also explains "in organic farming we use the concept of rotation. So as a best practice we would try not to grow the same family again in that same pot. The reason is that they are absorbing the same nutrients and if there were problems like diseases or pests during the previous round, they might still be dormant in the soil." The rotation would tend to be leafy vegetables, then root vegetables, then fruiting vegetables – you can find lots of 'rules' regarding rotation online. For small containers it may be easier to replace the soil entirely.



Broccoli growing at Rooftop Republic

hung above them to ward off birds. Another Hong Kong gardening issue to bear in mind is the loading capacity of the balcony or rooftop. "If you are on a balcony and have pots on a small scale it should be fine, but if you are stacking up with a lot of pots it can get heavy. The soil doubles its weight when it's full of water and this can be an issue in the summer when it rains a lot." The summer conditions here create another issue. "We have to be careful during the typhoon season to secure things like trellises. Plants can look a bit battered after a typhoon, but adult plants will revive after a few days."

Inspiration for your edible garden can be found in workshops run by Rooftop Republic and other organisations, or through visiting local farmers' markets. "Get to know the farmers, some of them are willing to open their farms to visitors." Kadoorie Farm and Botanical Gardens has an eco-garden showcasing ways to grow food in an urban environment (their website offers tips on planting times for veggies too). Michelle also recommends a visit to Joey and the team at Zen Organic Farm. The Go Green Organic Farm even offers farmland rental if you decide to fully embrace your inner farmer.

In addition to being great outdoor fun, getting the kids involved in growing their own food can encourage them to eat their greens. Start small, pick your varieties carefully, and make the most of the fact that in Hong Kong we can grow something edible all year round! 🌱

CONTACTS

Kadoorie Farm & Botanical Gardens
www.kfbg.org

Zen Organic Farm
www.zeno.com.hk

The Go Green Organic Farm
www.gogreenlife.com.hk

Rooftop Republic
www.rooftoprepublic.com

TOXIN REMOVING PLANTS

In addition to growing plants for food, how about growing plants to remove toxins from the air in your home? The toxins that affect us at home differ from those that affect us outside. Toxins indoors include: Trichloroethylene – found in printing inks, paints and varnishes; Formaldehyde – found in paper towels, napkins, plywood and synthetic fabrics; Benzene – found in plastics, resins, synthetic fibres and pesticides; Ammonia – Found in window cleaners, floor waxes and fertilisers; Xylene – found in printing, rubber, leather and paint. Anna McConnachie, Outdoor Stylist for The Home Stylist, recommends the best options for Hong Kong



Dwarf Date Palm (*Phoenix Roebelenii*) – filters

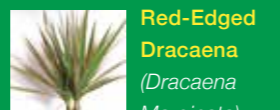
Formaldehyde and xylene and looks wonderful in the corner of a room to add height and drama.



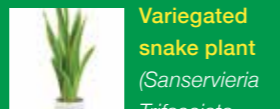
Peace Lily (*Spathiphyllum 'Mauna Loa'*) – filters all

the listed toxins and can be placed next to beds/sofas and in the bathroom without taking up too much space

and they give off a lovely zen energy.

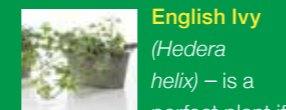


Red-Edged Dracaena (*Dracaena Marginata*) – filters all the listed toxins except Ammonia and gives a subtle colour pop in your room.



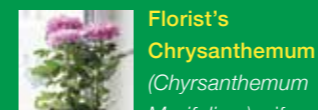
Variegated snake plant (*Sanserviera Trifasciata 'Laurentii'*) – probably the

most abundant, cheapest and easiest plant to grow in Hong Kong, and looks great in industrial type interior design schemes, this filters all the listed toxins except for Ammonia.



English Ivy (*Hedera helix*) – is a perfect plant if

you want something trailing over a plinth in your home, it filters all the listed toxins except ammonia.



Florist's Chrysanthemum (*Chrysanthemum Morifolium*) – if

you are after a pop of colour in your home as well as filtering lots of toxins, you've hit a home run with this one, it filters all five toxins.