Timing is everything. Familiarize yourself with the length of time your plants need to mature and plan accordingly. You can maximize the productivity of your available space with a technique known as succession planting. This entails replacing spent crops with new plantings.

For example, in the same 3-foot-by-3-foot plot where I harvested my garlic last June, I planted basil seedlings. By August, my freezer was filled with pesto and my basil was spent. I replaced it with a fall planting of mizuna and dwarf kale, which, with a little shelter from the elements, provided me with fresh greens well into December. That's four different food sources in 9 square feet.

Another way to make the best of your plants' various time requirements is to interplant short-season crops with longer-season crops. A common example is that of radishes and lettuce; planting fast-growing radishes among slower-growing lettuces allows you to harvest the radishes just as the lettuce requires extra space to mature to its full size.

Size does matter. While planning the layout of your garden, take time to learn how large your plants will grow. Size plays an important role when deciding where to place different crops in relation to each other. Make sure tall growing plants won't be preventing sunlight from reaching the smaller plants. Likewise, use tall plants to your advantage by creating shade for cool-season crops. Keeping in mind plant size also allows small-space gardeners to experiment with different spacing patterns.

For example, the intensive method of gardening prescribes planting crops in a staggered pattern so the fully mature plants just touch each other. This creates an umbrella effect, which slows evaporation from the soil, prevents weeds from getting sunlight, regulates air temperature around the plants and prevents soil erosion. This makes for very efficient use of available ground by eliminating unfilled spaces present in traditional row gardening.

Don't limit yourself. Growing food does not have to be limited to the ground. Vertical gardening allows small space gardeners to grow very large plants with the use of trellises. Melons, pole beans, cucumbers and vining squash all respond well to trellising. Any number of food crops can also be grown in containers.

Start with containers that have good drainage; you can make your own by drilling holes in the bottoms and sides of old plastic tubs or garbage cans. Window boxes are great places to grow salad greens, small bushy herbs or edible flowers.

With a little perseverance and creativity, you can coax delicious, fresh food out of the smallest spaces.

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For answers to your gardening questions, contact Master Gardeners by e-mail at centree2@psu.edu

coming up

Friday:  Weekender
Saturday: Values & Walt Mills
Sunday:  Living & Russell Frank
Monday:  Health & Science
Tuesday:  On Centre
Wednesday: Home & Cooking

SEEDS OF WISDOM

Kristen Devlin

Don't let lack of space limit you

Given that we Americans have one of the lowest grocery bills in the world, some people balk at the notion of growing their own food.

But the reasons for growing at least a portion of your own food are more than a matter of economics.

Being your own farmer helps reduce your impact on the environment by eliminating the chemicals, packaging and fossil fuels invested in getting your food from the far reaches of the world to your table.

You have the freedom to choose unique varieties of fruits, vegetables and herbs that will amaze your friends and family. Perhaps most importantly, the delight of harvesting and serving food you grew restores a sense of celebration to the act of eating.

So, if growing food makes so much sense, why doesn't everyone do it?

One commonly cited obstacle is lack of space. Gardening in small spaces is challenging, but by no means impossible. With more than 1 million acres of American farmland disappearing each year, growing food in small spaces is fast becoming a matter of necessity. You can maximize your food production capability no matter how small your gardening space by following a few simple rules while planning your garden.