

# Balcony Gardens

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Being an apartment dweller shouldn't keep you from having a garden. Many types of gardens can be created on balconies. With the addition of floral color, a balcony becomes an entertainment center just right for relaxing. Turf, small shrubs, and dwarf trees can be used to create a suburban landscape in miniature above the ground. Balconies even offer the opportunity for food production, with flowering fruit trees and container-grown herbs and vegetables.

Whether transforming a highrise penthouse or a simple second-floor terrace into a garden, a set of guidelines will aid in creating your "garden on high." First, consider how you wish to use the area. Are you looking for a colorful relaxation area or just privacy from an adjacent highrise?

Second, evaluate the microclimate. Toward which direction does the balcony face? Note how much sun the area receives and for how long. If the balcony is recessed, does direct sunlight reach it at all? If the situation is very open, will you and your plantings be subjected to buffeting winds and scorching sunlight? Look at the area with a very critical eye before putting a lot of money in to the project. Some minor remodelling may need to be done to make the area inviting to both people and plants.

Safety considerations are another important factor to think about. Most balconies are required by building safety codes to support 60 pounds per square foot. Be sure to use a lightweight growing media which can reduce weight by up to 60% over standard garden soil. Avoid using heavy containers; plastics are recommended for low-weight situations.

Once you have evaluated the balcony for comfort and safety, you may start looking for plant materials. Spend some time reading gardening books which focus on container gardening. Choose plants suitable to your site.

The plants on an outdoor balcony will usually be enjoyed indoors as well, so be sure to plant eye-catching displays where they can be viewed through glass doors. For example, miniature conifers in a wooden trough offer year-round viewing pleasure. Clematis trained up a permanent trellis does wonders to disguise an unsightly view.

Many summer bedding plants are suitable in a sunny, balcony location. Try grandiflora petunias, graced by big, bright flowers, or compact salvias with red blossoms on strong, stocky spikes. Even a shady position still provides a multitude of choices. Experiment with shade lovers including climbing or trailing ivies; year-round, evergreen plants such as boxwood; and annuals like impatiens or browallia to brighten sheltered areas.

One popular way to display a variety of plants in a small space is the "three-tier" design. Upright plants are used against a wall or trellis, or as the centerpiece in a planting box to add height. Bushy, medium-height plants fill in the bulk of the container. Trailing plants placed on the edges of the planter tumble over the sides softening the composition.

Balconies have been transformed into the "backyards" for thousands of apartment, condominium, and townhouse dwellers across the country. Be adventurous. Your balcony may be just the spot.

(Prepared by Virginia Nathan, Extension Technician, Consumer Horticulture, Virginia Tech, from materials supplied by The National Garden Bureau.)