

It's surprising how much you can grow in pots on a balcony or sill

Lu Feiran

Most Shanghai urban residents buy vegetables in supermarkets or from local produce vendors without a thought about where such basic foodstuffs come from. Spotty vegetable supplies during the current coronavirus lockdown have prompted some people to get creative about favorite Chinese culinary ingredients.

Housewife Zhang Qin, who lives in Changning District, was worried when supplies of fresh vegetables became erratic, so she decided to explore what can be grown at home.

"We have four people living in our condo, including a senior and a child," Zhang said. "Although we have plenty of other food, we went through days of shortages of fruits and vegetables, like many other residents in Shanghai."

In the past, Zhang dismissed the idea of growing vegetables at home, reasoning that she wasn't living in "an era of starvation after all."

But now she saves the roots of Chinese cabbages and small green vegetables and puts them into water, hoping that they will sprout new leaves.

Zhang is not alone. Many people on the Weibo social platform are sharing their experiences of growing vegetables and spices on their balconies or in small backyard gardens. It can be tricky for the uninitiated.

"Online guidance tells me that spring onion and garlic shoots are quite fast growing," Zhang said. "Such produce is usually available either in group vegetable purchases or food boxes provided by the government, so they are good choices for hydroponic propagation."

Zhang put the roots of spring onions in a bowl filled with water. The Internet tells her this "water planting" method needs only a few drops of nutrient solution, but plain water works, too. It's just a matter of waiting for the roots to regrow shoots.

She said she is well aware that the system won't produce volumes of onions, but even a few in the next few weeks would help enhance the flavor of family meals.



Cherry tomatoes are among a host of smaller vegetables that can be successfully cultivated in a sunny spot at home. — IC



Housewife Zhang Qin's home "farm" produces small green. — Ti Gong

For residents who have developed balcony "farming" as a long-held hobby, the vegetables they grow in pots have become emergency food supplies.

One example is Ming Cheng, a traditional Chinese doctor now living in Fengxian District.

available on e-commerce platforms. The mixture is ideal for growing most types of vegetables available in local markets, she said.

"When I plant something, I feel a renewed link with nature," she explained.

Ming said a friend of hers who doesn't have a yard asked for her advice on growing vegetables in pots on south-facing windowsills. The friend uses riverside soil and nourishes the plants with rice water. She has successfully cultivated sesame, sweet potatoes and an Asian mint called purple perilla.

The vegetable-growing trend is not confined to Shanghai. In other cities with coronavirus lockdowns, people are showing innovation with green thumbs.

In the southern city of Shenzhen, which went through a lockdown last month, a young couple built a tiny farm on their balcony.

"When I heard there would be a lockdown, I rushed to the supermarket and found the shelves almost empty," said the wife, who identified herself only as Echo. "But I thought about our balcony farm and felt much less anxious."

Various vegetables, fruits and spices, including peppers, mint, eggplant and dwarf lemon trees, grow happily on a balcony of less than 6 square meters.

An illustrator, Echo said she started to grow vegetables in 2020, when the coronavirus pandemic first started. Prior to that, she was successful at growing flowers.

"If you want to harvest within a short period of time, leeks, spring onions and small Chinese greens are the best choices," she said. "For small greens, it takes only a month from seed to harvest."

Echo's husband, a programmer, helps out on "the farm." He designed a symbiotic system for fish and plants, which waters the plants automatically.

"It's not that we have to live on this little farm, but it does provide a sense of security," Echo said.

As for Zhang Qin, she's becoming more ambitious. Her next plan is to learn how to grow bean sprouts.

"We live in an era when we need to be making long-term plans," she said.

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Ming, who hails from central China's Henan Province, tended a small garden at her childhood home and said she had been growing vegetables and fruits since high school.

She brought her hobby with her when she moved to Shanghai for work.

Fortunately, Ming has a small yard area to garden. Soil in Shanghai is generally good for growing fruits and vegetables, she said. She mixes native soil with premium potting soil and composted soil