

FIVE TIPS TO KICKSTART YOUR URBAN GARDEN

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PHOTO BY JOHN MIDGLEY

By Liora Fishman



Some plants thrive on a Brooklyn fire escape.

As the weather is warming up, many Coop members (myself included) have been eagerly checking the produce aisle for plants, seeds and gardening tools to make the most of the outdoor space we have—even if that’s a fire escape. As one of the lucky New Yorkers to have outdoor space (I have what one could probably describe as the World’s Most Narrow Balcony—but a balcony nonetheless) I’ve made use of vertical planters; and for the second consecutive summer, I planted an herb garden. I’ve already inexplicably killed a parsley plant; but my scallions from the Coop are growing healthily.

A DROUGHT-TOLERANT, SHADE-TOLERANT ASSORTMENT OF HERBS IS OFTEN YOUR BEST BET.





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And although this isn't my first year planting a garden on my balcony, I wanted to consult the internet to understand exactly what one should do when planting an urban garden, whether it's on a fire escape, or a rooftop, or a patio deck.

1. **Fire escape gardens are illegal:** Not that that's stopping some New Yorkers from having one, but it's worth stating—so if you do choose to have a fire escape garden, be aware that you might draw unwanted attention from your landlord. If that's a concern for you, houseplants are probably your best bet.
2. **Be a minimalist:** Most apartment gardens are spatially limited, and sometimes that means natural light is limited too. Avoid big plants—this is not your moment to grow an olive tree from seed. Opt for simpler, drought-tolerant plants that won't block each others' light if they bloom. If you're especially tight on space, consider planting multiple kinds of herbs in one container. Just be sure to give the herbs enough space from each other, otherwise they'll die.
3. **Leave a clear footpath:** This is especially the case if you are planting on your fire

escape. Don't use too many pots, and always leave a clear footpath for yourself, as tempting as it may be to fill your fire escape with greenery. Better yet—try hanging planters that hook to railings. Given how narrow my outdoor space is, this is what use in my own space, and I love the added layer of privacy I get from some of the planters.

4. **Choose your plants wisely:** Not all plants grow well in New York, but some do. According to the New York Parks & Recreation department, native plants are plants that naturally occur “in a region without having been introduced from elsewhere by people. New York City natives include mosses, ferns, grasses, sedges and rushes, wildflowers, trees, shrubs, and vines.” Choosing native plants for your garden will increase the likelihood that your garden not only blooms but thrives in its climate. Luckily, the Coop carries variations of native plants throughout the season.
5. **Plan for the winter:** Most plants, even at their toughest, cannot survive the great outdoors that is New York City winter. Winterizing perennials is crucial to their survival. Once the summer has come to an end and the first 1–2 inches of soil has frozen, you should consider covering the top of the plant bed with loose organic mulch such as shredded leaves or pine needles.



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Ultimately, you doesn't need to play it safe with your urban garden. I've had friends harvest peppers, even eggplant, from their rooftops and terraces. But for the gardening novice (which I still consider myself) a drought-tolerant, shade-tolerant assortment of herbs is often your best bet. Plus, there's no better treat than seasoning your food with basil you grew yourself. As New York City dwellers, it's a pleasure we don't often get to enjoy—and which we should take advantage of, when we are given the opportunity to do so.

Liora Fishman lives in Prospect Heights and has a dog named Ollie.