

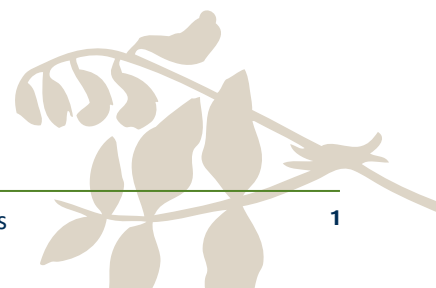


Habitat gardens for Small Spaces

RENTALS, COURTYARDS AND BALCONIES

Creating a garden on a balcony, courtyard and rooftop can lift your spirits, help green our environment and create habitat for local wildlife. If you are renting, or if you have a balcony or courtyard - pots are the way to go. Pots give you the freedom to experiment with different textures and arrangements and allow you to take your plants with you when you move.

If you are renting, take some time to figure out what you wish to achieve and how much money you're willing to commit. You may only have a 1-year lease and just want a weekend project, or you may have a few years. Either way be careful not to start something you may not finish.



The key to designing a beautiful potted habitat garden:

Big is better

A large pot containing a tree or shrub underplanted with smaller plants or trailing groundcovers will have more impact than 20 random small pots and plants. Large pots also dry out less quickly than small pots which means your plants are more likely to survive if you forget to water them or go away for a holiday. Invest in pots and planters that you can take with you if you move – for large planters, choose lightweight fiberglass it will be easier to transport than terra cotta or concrete pots.

Mix sizes and styles and group them together, your potted garden should resemble a community of plants. Pick your hero pot (your big pot) and group 3 – 5 smaller pots either side. Think about layering plants and pots of different heights and sizes and different leaf sizes and textures – the taller trees and shrubs will provide shade for smaller plants. Vines can also be planted in pots and grown on a trellis to create vertical layering and provide shelter and nesting sites for small birds. The most important thing is to group plants that have similar water requirements together.

Plant selection

Select plants that will grow in the conditions of your balcony or courtyard. Consider the microclimates when selecting your plants. If the wall is north facing it will be receiving a lot of sun during the day. A south facing balcony will grow shade tolerant plants. A great idea is to put your pots on wheels and if they seem to be struggling in one area, shift them around until you find the microclimate in which they thrive.



KIDNEY WEED

Trailing plants for pots:

Blushing Bindweed (*Convolvulus angustissimus*), Kidney Weed (*Dichondra repens*), Ruby Saltbush (*Enchylaena tomentosa*), Twining Glycine (*Clycine clandestrina*).



SILVER BANKSIA

Large plants for pots:

Dwarf form Red-flowering Gum (*Corymbia ficifolia*), Gynea Lily (*Doryanthes excelsa*); Silver Banksia (*Banksia marginata*).



CLUSTERED EVERLASTING

Flowering plants for pots:

Austral Stork's Bill (*Pelargonium austral*), Blue Devil (*Eryngium ovinum*), Common Everlasting (*Chrysocephalum apiculatum*), Tufted Bluebell (*Wahlenbergia communis*); White Elderberry (*Sambucus gaudichaudiana*).



SMALL LEAVED CLEMATIS

Climbing plants for pots:

Purple Coral-Pea (*Hardenbergia violacea*), Small leaved Clematis (*Clematis microphylla*).



Potting mix and watering potted plants

Choose the best quality potting mix you can afford. The better the mix the happier and longer living the plant. Invest in a potting mix specially for native plants that is quick draining and water retentive. Once your plants are established sprinkle a slow release native fertilizer, worm castings to keep your plants healthy. The soil level should be 50 – 75mm below the pot rim and then add a layer of fine bark mulch to keep soil cooler, retain moisture, reduce weed growth and improved soil fertility. Remember to keep the mulch 3 or 4 fingers distance away from the plant or else it can lead to rot, disease and insect problems. Give your plants a boost by spreading compost over the potting mix before you apply mulch.

Invest in pots that allow for adequate root growth and stability whilst also having good drainage holes. Make sure excess water runoff is collected in pot saucers and consider raising the pots on 'feet' so the water doesn't stain your tiles or deck.

Potted plants often die or become stressed when watering is interrupted or if it has been windy. Keep a watering can handy for spot watering individual plants. Paved courtyards may result in heat build-up so plants will help cool the area, but their water requirements will be high. Self-watering pots that have their own water reservoir are a good solution or install a drip watering system.



Be creative

Think vertical as well as horizontal – maximise your green space by installing planter boxes or tiered shelving. Hanging baskets planted with trailing groundcovers also create vertical greenery and you may find birds using your hanging baskets to nest in.

Often courtyards are surrounded by walls or fences that are different materials and colours, this can be a distracting backdrop to the garden. Painting your courtyard is a quick and easy way to unify and simplify a space. Although painting your fence a white or light colour can make you space seem larger and bounce light into your home it will drain the colour out of your plants. Charcoal or dark coloured fences will define the boundary of your space and provide contrast to light coloured pavers or decking. Importantly a dark coloured fence will enhance your plants and make green foliage, purples, reds, pinks, whites, and yellows pop.

Buy flexible furniture. If you are renting you may not know where you'll end up next, so resist buying heavy pieces that will be hard to move and may not fit in your future garden. Invest in smaller furnishings, such as folding tables and collapsible chairs, that pack up easily and are likely to suit any space.

Attract birds to your courtyard

Attract wildlife to your garden by adding a water feature or birdbath into the space so birds can drink and bath. Just follow these simple steps:

- Keep the water cool by placing the water bowl in dappled shade
- Birds use baths to drink and bath so replace the water and clean your birdbath regularly to avoid the spread of beak and feather disease
- Where possible, position the bath near trees or shrubs so smaller birds can duck for cover if threatened
- Ensure the bath is out of reach of cats - a pedestal bath is ideal. If there are no cats in your neighbourhood a simple terra cotta pot saucer on the ground is ideal
- If your bird bath is deep or has a smooth surface, place rocks, an old branch or even a brick in the bottom so birds have something they can stand on while they bathe.

Stand back and review your design. There should be a feeling of harmony in your space. Rotate or rearrange pots to create visual balance. It doesn't matter how small your garden, balcony or courtyard is - any pocket of habitat that you can provide is important. By planting indigenous plants in pots, you are helping to connect a web of green across our landscape.



Reference and further reading

Adams, George *Birdscaping Australian Gardens. Using Native Plants to Attract Birds to your Garden* Penguin Books, 2015

Birdlife Australia *Providing Water for Birds* <https://www.birdsinbackyards.net/Bird-Baths>