

Small-Space Garden Quick-Start Companion

A practical field guide for turning the workbook into one usable plan.



INCLUDED COMPANION RESOURCE

Version 1.0 | September 2026

BEGIN HERE

Your first 15 minutes

This guide explains how to use the workbook efficiently. It does not prescribe local planting dates, spacing, pesticide use, or structural loading.

The quick path

- Choose one real growing space.
- Measure it and observe direct light.
- Name the limits that could make maintenance difficult.
- Shortlist foods you actually use.
- Verify each exact variety using a seed packet, nursery label, or local Extension source.
- Sketch one layout, buy only what fits, and choose the first action.

A good first plan is small enough to maintain and specific enough to act on.

STEP 1

Define the space before the plants

Record usable dimensions, doors, railings, drains, heat-reflecting walls, wind exposure, water access, and any building rules. A balcony or elevated structure may have load limits; ask the property owner or a qualified professional rather than estimating structural capacity.

What to photograph

- ☐ The whole space from the entrance
- ☐ The sunniest and shadiest areas
- ☐ Water source and drainage path
- ☐ Railings, walls, doors, and obstacles

Useful result

A labeled sketch with actual dimensions and areas that must stay clear.

STEP 2

Observe light instead of guessing

Direct sunlight changes with buildings, railings, trees, weather, and season. Check the same locations at several times. Record what you observed and the date; do not convert one brief observation into a year-round promise.

Time	Direct sun?	Location	What casts shade?

Decision rule

If the pattern is unclear, keep the crop list provisional and observe again before purchasing plants.

STEP 3

Use a source ladder for crop facts

Spacing, mature size, container suitability, and timing depend on the exact crop and variety. Use the most specific credible source available and record it.

Priority	Source	Best use
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- 1. Exact seed packet or plant label - variety-specific instructions.
- 2. Local Cooperative Extension - regional timing and pest guidance.
- 3. University or government publication - established reference information.
- 4. Experienced local nursery - practical local context; verify consequential claims.

Avoid

Anonymous snippets, unsourced social posts, and copying a schedule from a different climate without checking local conditions.

STEP 4

Choose crops that earn their space

Small spaces reward selectivity. Score candidates for actual use, space fit, light fit, maintenance, and personal value. A fashionable crop that your household will not use may be a poor choice.

Crop / variety	Use	Space fit	Light fit	Care fit	Keep?

STEP 5

Match the container to the job

Confirm the exact plant's mature size and rooting needs from a credible source. Check that the container drains, can be watered safely, is permitted where placed, and will not block access.

- ☐ Drainage route will not create a hazard
- ☐ Container can be reached and moved safely
- ☐ Support or trellis has an approved attachment
- ☐ Watering will not damage the building or neighboring space
- ☐ Materials are intended for the proposed growing use
- ☐ Total setup stays within the approved budget

STEP 6

Build a readable layout

Start with boundaries and access. Add fixed objects, then containers or beds, then plants at verified mature size. Put supports where they will not create an access or shading problem.

Use three layers

- Structure: walls, rails, doors, water, drains, and paths.
- Growing zones: containers, bed edges, shelves, or vertical supports.
- Crops: labeled varieties, quantities, spacing source, and support needs.

Reality check

Can you water, inspect, harvest, and clean every planted area without moving half the garden?

STEP 7

Make the purchase list last

Separate essentials from upgrades. Every purchase should have a place in the layout and a purpose in the plan. Record actual cost so the next edition of your plan improves.

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Exact seed or plant variety | ☐ Container or bed component |
| ☐ Growing medium or amendment | ☐ Support or fastening item |
| ☐ Watering item | ☐ Label or recordkeeping supply |

Stop-spending rule

If an item has no assigned location or task, leave it off the first purchase.

STEP 8

Choose a minimum care rhythm

A useful system must survive busy weeks. Decide what you will check, what triggers action, and where you will record it.

Check	Trigger / frequency	What I record	Next action

WHEN SOMETHING LOOKS WRONG

Describe first; diagnose second

Record the plant, location, date, pattern, recent change, and a clear photo. Compare against a qualified source before treating. Do not combine products or apply a pesticide contrary to its label.

- ☐ Describe the visible symptom without naming a cause
- ☐ Check more than one plant and both leaf surfaces
- ☐ Review watering, weather, light, and recent changes
- ☐ Consult local Extension or another qualified source
- ☐ Read and follow the entire product label if treatment is considered
- ☐ Escalate food-safety, structural, toxic, or uncertain issues

Track usefulness, not just harvest weight

A crop may earn its place through flavor, convenience, learning, sharing, enjoyment, or avoided purchases. Record enough to make next season's decision easier.

Crop	Useful result	Friction	Keep / change / remove

END OF THE CYCLE

Keep, change, remove

Review the system while the details are fresh. Preserve successful measurements, sources, photographs, and layout choices so you do not restart from zero.

Keep

Change

Remove

TRUSTED RESOURCES

Where to verify local and safety-sensitive facts

These links are maintained by the named organizations. Verify the current page and publication date when you use them.

Resource	Use	Address
USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map	Perennial cold-hardiness context; not a complete vegetable planting calendar.	https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/
USDA NIFA land-grant directory	Find land-grant universities and Extension partners serving your region.	https://www.nifa.usda.gov/grants/land-grant-university-website-directory
EPA pesticide labels	Understand why label directions govern safe and legal pesticide use.	https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-labels/introduction-pesticide-labels

Important: The USDA hardiness map describes average annual extreme minimum winter temperatures and perennial survival likelihood. Use local, crop-specific guidance for vegetable timing.