

## Cover Story

4/1/2023

# Building a Patio Vegetable Program

Lowell Halvorson



Patio vegetables balance garden and décor in high-traffic areas like the sunny deck, brick patio, front porch or grilling range. They need to harvest well and look good doing it. Key to this strategy are varieties purpose-bred for the task, supporting 4-in. miniatures to 16-in. masterpieces lugged to the car.

Another advantage is their speed to retail. Cucumbers turn from seeds to fruit in about four weeks. Peppers go from plugs to near-harvest in about 70 to 80 days. Tomato plugs become products about six weeks later. I consider near-harvest as fruit visible and green, although many vegetables can retail with attractive flowers. That window is wider than traditional sales, from mid-April (“Why wait? Harvest now!”) to the Fourth of July (“Summer harvest for backyard parties!”).



The bonsai of the business is the tabletop display, designed to live out its life in the original container. Simple or fancy, it creates a moment to pause and reflect on the qualities that come with a botanical lifestyle. If that sentence resonates with you and your customers, you have the secret sauce to open new sales territory with shop-n-drop techniques you already know.

- *Pictured: Tomato Siam is happy to live out its lifespan in 6-in. pottery.*

- *The peppers on the Galaxy series appear very close to the main stem.*

## Mini and Compact Tomatoes

An important detail about tomatoes is their inelastic nature: their vines grow to their genetic length. Stick a plug in a larger pot and you’ll still get the same size plant. Nearly all the small varieties are determinate; their harvest appears in waves, with the best one first. They benefit from décor staking or cages right away, as most sit upright until the fruit sets and then slump over from the heavier weight.

The Ponchi series (grape, 6-in. or 8-in. high) is the closest to a teacup tomato you’ll find and it’s quick to mature (50 to 60 days). Plants are tall and narrow with small leaves, few branches and fruit held close to the stem for balance.

Series variations echo the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: short Ponchi Do (weeping orange) and Ponchi Re (upright orange), and big Ponchi Me (orange cherry) and Ponchi Fa (tart red) rising 8 in. above the pot.

The Kitchen Minis program straddles harvest and décor equally. Red Velvet (red cherry, 6-in. high) and Cocoa (dark cherry, 6-in. high) have a beefier width and bigger fruit. These two are perfectly happy in 4-in. pots. Kicking it up a notch, Siam (red cherry, 6-in. to 8-in. high) provides the same style in a larger 6-in. pot.

In the mid-range for floor patios is the Little series. Little Napoli (red cherry, 12-in. to 24-in. high) grows well in 8-in. pots, whereas Little Bing (red cherry, 18-in. to 24-in. high) and Little Sicily (small red slicer, 18-in. to 24-in. high) produce larger, stouter plants more capable of filling out larger, heavier 10- to 12-in. pots without rambling. Patio Delight (small red slicer, 12-in. to 18-in. high) comes in from the backyard. More picnic than coffee table, the small-and-sweet slicer ripens quickly (55 days).

For whiskey barrels, look at the Magnúsa series. It fills floor baskets and barrel tops with tri-color displays of yellow, orange and red cherries. Plants mound up before cascading out. A special mention goes to Goodhearted (16-in. high) for the sheer WOW power. Beautiful heart-shaped fruits display on wide trusses spraying over the top of the leaves. Habit is wider than tall.

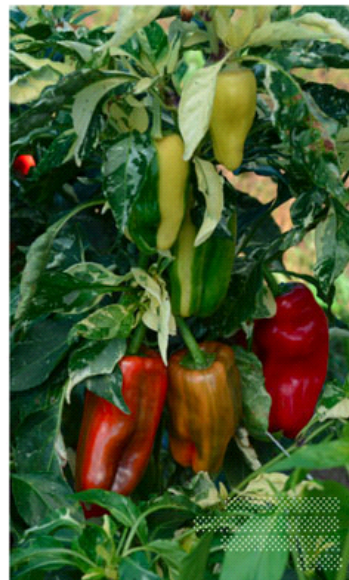
- *Pictured: The heart-shaped fruit of Tomato Goodhearted works really well in décor pots.*
- *Use Pepper Candy Cane Red for its striped fruit and variegated foliage.*
- *The short vines of Cucumber Patio Snacker curl up trellis and pyramids.*

## Tree-Like Peppers

Peppers are elastic in size. Plant a plug in a larger pot and you'll get a larger plant, within reason. Many varieties work because their tree-like structure and vase or ball shapes fit in well with furniture. The fun fruit choices fill a category of their own: ornamental peppers. Below are edible versions that still hold up as ornamentals. Peppers take longer than tomatoes from planting, so start these products a couple of weeks earlier.

The Galaxy series sits only 3 to 4-in. high (no kidding) and ships with a range of heat. Red is mild, yellow is spicy and orange is hot. Tall, narrow plants hold missile-shaped fruit close to the stem, radiating outwards.

The Fresh Bites series (12-in. to 14-in. high) are vase-shaped plants with sweet missiles in three colors. Their companion hot pepper program has 12 choices with a range of heat. The mildest is Adobo (12-in. to 14-in. high), a narrow tree with red fruit. The hottest is Lemon Zest (12-in. to 14-in. high) with small yellow drops dangling down within its canopy. The smallest one, Taquito (5-in. to 6-in. high), has leaves at ground level and sends spicy red missiles upward.





Some garden varieties play the décor card hard. The two Candy Canes (18-in. to 24-in. high) have variegated foliage and distinct stripes on their snack-sized cone peppers. Confetti (18-in. to 20-in. high) also has funky leaf variegation with brightly colored bell peppers that ripen through green, orange and red. Demon Red (12-in. to 16-in. high) grows out like a garden mum with pepper missiles rising.



## Short Vine Cucumbers

Direct sow cucumbers into the container and fruit appears in about 35 to 40 days. Bush cucumbers are still vines—just short ones with lots of leaves. Add support.

Use Quick Snack for 4-in. pots. The vine is 20-in. long, so drape it over a 10-in. fan trellis for the best display, however, you can pinch the tips at 10 in. for a one-sided presentation. It delivers mini cucumbers.

For larger containers, use Patio Snacker. It grows many short vines that can be wrapped around cages, pyramids or trellises above the container. Expect full-sized cucumbers, but baby ones are also edible.

- *Pictured: With flowers and fruit all season, Eggplant Patio Baby has a short, vaguely fig-like look.*

- *Cauliflower Baby is a miniature in the spirit of a 4-in. autumn cabbage.*



## Early Season Options

Cauliflower Baby (6-in. high) is a miniature cauliflower in the spirit of 4-in. cabbages or kales. Leaves and curd (flowerhead) are edible, so it can be added to a spring vegetable effort or an autumn ornamental display. Expect 40 days to harvest from plug.

Viola Tasteful is a series specifically bred for taste with a mildly sweet-and-peppery flavor. Restaurants use it for garnishes or as a salad ingredient. Like all violas, plants flower heavily over the top of their green. Harvest in 50 to 60 days; seeds aren't treated with chemicals.

SimplySalad (about 12-in. high) is the recommended way to build out décor salad bowls. Not all lettuces grow well together, never mind looks. This series grooms the mix to look good and taste good, but plugs are recommended over seed. Choose from nine different bowl-shaped haircuts.

## Two Summer Choices

Eggplant Patio Baby (18-in. to 22-in. high) is a hefty plant with a strong central stem and vaguely fig-like leaves. Plants are thornless, flowers are violet and fruits are thin miniatures. Plants produce all summer, and the combination of plant, flower and fruit looks great together. Slice fruits in half and throw them on the grill. Harvests much earlier at 45 days.

Okra Baby Bubba (36-in. to 48-in. high) is a half-sized dwarf okra in a tall column shape with wide palmate leaves. The stem is thick and almost tree-like. Trumpet flowers are yellow with a deep red eye and the full-sized fruit displays upward. Most people have never seen (or tasted) okra in the field, so this is an exotic. Harvest in 53 days.

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