



By Barbara Elmore, HCMG

Gardening in Really Small Spaces

From Austin to Manhattan to Central Florida to Australia and places in between, gardeners are using clunky pieces of masonry as planters and bragging about it. It's easy to see why this simple idea is exciting to people who plant things.

Cinder blocks, known for their sturdiness in building construction, have become the centerpieces of back-to-earth gardening movements because they are cheap and utilitarian. Depending on the size, they are available for 99 cents for small blocks with one hole to about \$2.60 for big ones with two holes. Sometimes, if alert and/or very lucky, you can get them free.

And they are utilitarian. Although they can be heavy to move around, they are:

- Easy foundation and edging blocks for people who don't want to use a hammer and nails
- Useful for people with no space to spare
- A breeze to anchor with bricks or rebar
- Pleasing to the eye if laid out thoughtfully
- A nice size for small plants that don't need to spread out
- Hard to destroy and sturdy in all kinds of weather
- Convenient when raised for gardeners who have back trouble or other physical problems.



One place to see them in use in Texas is the East Side Café in Austin, 2113 Manor Road, where the motto is, "We don't grow everything we serve, but we serve everything we grow." This café also boasts chicken coops, an irrigation system and lots of space. Workers at the garden behind the restaurant have laid out curved rows of cinder block planters in various heights, with treasures planted in each hole. Go to eastsidecafeaustin.com, and click on "Garden" if you want to see pictures. Scroll down for a mouth-watering array of produce.

Cinder block gardeners report in online forums that they have successfully grown cilantro, parsley, chives, basil, turnip greens, thyme, tomatoes, eggplant, bok choy (Chinese cabbage), ferns and flowers. Most suggest using one plant per hole; watering these plants a bit more than in-ground plants, especially during summer; growing small things only; and watching out for critters that like to make the holes their home. They also suggest experimenting to find out what grows best.

The original reason for the cinder block's hollow squares was to allow the building of structures in the traditional masonry style of overlapping rows, with the structure's weight carried by the "walls" of the blocks. Leave it to a resourceful gardener to find additional uses for empty spaces.