

Plant pairing in balcony gardens

By Dr CHRISTOPHER TEH

Do you have a question about plants or how to maintain your garden? Send your questions to the Plant Doctor! Email your questions to lifestyle@thestar.com.my with "Plant Doctor" in the subject field. Questions may be edited for brevity and clarity.

Dear Plant Doctor,

Q I read that plant pairing in balcony gardens is necessary to maximise space and help plants thrive. I live on the 16th floor and only get direct sunlight for about half of my balcony space, which is about 4ft x 10ft (1.2m x 3m) in size. Can you share some tips on common and effective plant pairing methods for my balcony? Thanks. – *Maya*

In the sunny area of your balcony, consider pairing sun-loving plants, such as tomatoes, basil and marigolds. This combination not only thrives in full sun but also offers practical benefits. Basil has been claimed to enhance the flavour of tomatoes, although this has not been proven.

Marigolds, however, have been shown to deter certain pests. Another sun-loving pair is chilli pepper with lemongrass, both of which enjoy bright light and contribute to pest control.

For the shadier part of your balcony, focus should be on



Consider pairing plants such as tomatoes, basil and marigolds if your balcony gets good sunlight. – This visual is human-created, AI-aided.

plants that tolerate partial shade. A combination of kangkung (water spinach), lettuce and mint works well under these conditions. You may also try to pair them with beets.

To make the most of your limited space, incorporate vertical gardening techniques. Use trellises or wall-mounted planters

to grow climbing plants, such as peas or beans. This approach not only saves floor space but also adds visual interest to your balcony garden. Peas and beans can thrive with proper care.

For container gardening, choose large pots with good drainage to support the vigorous growth of tropical plants. Interesting arrangements can be created by mixing plants of different heights in the same container – tall plants in the back, medium-height plants in the middle, and trailing plants in front. This technique not only maximises space, but also creates an aesthetically pleasing display.

For soil and plant care, use a well-draining potting mix enriched with organic matter. This helps to retain moisture without waterlogging the roots, which is crucial for container gardens. Water your plants regularly, but do not overwater, and apply organic mulch to help regulate the soil temperature and retain moisture.

Do not forget to protect your plants from strong winds, which can be an issue for high-rise balconies. Mesh screens or taller and stronger plants can be used to shield more delicate ones from gusts.

Lastly, consider incorporating edible landscaping by mixing ornamental plants with edibles. For example, you can plant colourful Swiss chard or decorative kale alongside flowers, creating a garden that is both beautiful and productive.

By carefully selecting and pairing your plants, and adapting to the unique conditions of your balcony, you can create a lush, diverse and productive garden space, even in a high-rise setting.

Assoc Prof Dr Christopher Teh heads the Department of Land Management, Faculty of Agriculture, Universiti Putra Malaysia. His field of specialty is in soil and water conservation. The views expressed are entirely his own.