

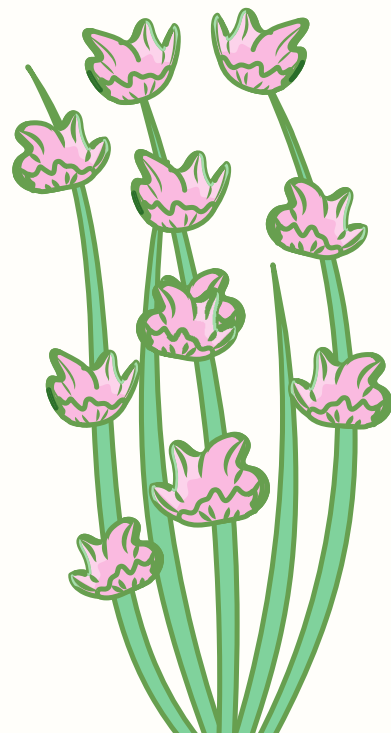


# 5 EASY TO GROW LOW MAINTENANCE PERENNIALS

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BY

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# WHY GROW EDIBLE PERENNIALS?

As a Permaculture Designer I'm always looking for ways to grow food with less resources, energy input, time and effort. And over the years, I've found myself focusing on perennial plants to provide nourishment, bountiful harvests, and productivity to the spaces I cultivate.

A perennial is a plant that can survive season after season. In countries with four seasons, perennials bloom in spring, summer and autumn, die over winter and come back naturally in the spring. But since we are in the tropics, the best part about growing edible perennials is that they provide leaves, fruits, and flowers all through the year!





While many of us are used to annuals such as lettuces, bok choy, kai lan, cai xin, rocket, cabbage, spinach or bayam, mustard leaves and xiao bai cai providing much of leafy green vegetables for nutrition, these plants require a lot of attention. Annuals need more care, effort and timely fertilising and skill to grow and maintain. They also require lots of sunlight to grow, and to be replanted after every season.

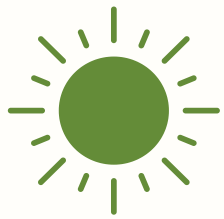
With perennials, you won't face these issues as they are hardy and suited to the local climate. These local perennials also rarely face any pest or disease issues and will continue to grow season after season, year after year without needing to be replanted.

Another advantage of growing perennials is having them handy on your balcony when you need a leafy green for a meal you're rustling up. Less trips to the supermarket (think less plastic packaging waste!) or local market and no chance of green leafy vegetables going bad in the fridge. I've found this aspect extremely convenient and satisfying. I can honestly say I haven't bought leafy greens in almost 4 years!



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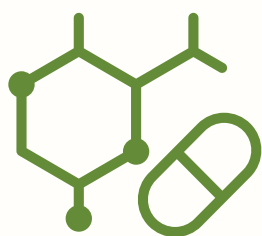


The amount of sunlight you get is always a big consideration when you're trying to grow edibles. Keeping this in mind, 4 out of 5 of the perennials I've chosen for you can grow in semi-shade conditions making them suited to any balcony garden.

Additionally, each will take up very little of your time, you'll just need to water them and then watch them take off!



While growing perennials is easy, the hardest part will be staying patient during the initial phases. When you plant any perennial, you'll want the plant to take root and establish themselves first and this may take a little bit of time. You want each plant to grow multiple stems or branches and have a good set of leaves before your first harvest.




And once you're able to harvest these leaves, they'll make a tasty and nutrient packed addition to your meals. Like most other leafy greens they're full of micronutrients, fibre, and in some cases proteins too.

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This is why I've turned to perennials, and not just any perennials, those that are particularly suited to our climate, are highly nutritious, and **have been part of our food heritage and culture in South and Southeast Asia for a long, long time.** We seem to have forgotten about many of these classic and easy-to-cook greens.

**Star gooseberry leaves, Brazilian spinach, Moringa leaves, sweet potato leaves, and garlic chives** are five of my favourite perennials. I've grown these on my balcony and also at our community farm at Goodman Grows, and they've become my go-to leafy greens for cooking, and will definitely make a great addition to any tropical urban food patch.



If you'd like to geek out and learn more about any of these edible perennials, I'd recommend you check out the [NParks Singapore Flora and Fauna guide online](#). It's a truly generous and informative resource especially for gardeners in the tropics.





# WHATS IN THIS GUIDE



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This guide covers a few essentials to help you understand these five perennials and how you can grow them.

If you're a **beginner gardener**, then you're in the right place! I'd recommend that **you choose two or three to start with** and get those growing and thriving before you add on the rest. This will keep things simple and manageable, which will only encourage you to learn about and grow more perennials to feed yourself and your family.

If you've been **growing annuals regularly**, then you're also in the right place as you can begin adding some perennials to the edibles you're already growing.

Each perennial covered in this guide can be grown in a small space such as a balcony. All you have to do is get some soil and an appropriate sized planter.

Along the way, I'll share tips I've learned from growing these edibles in my balcony garden over the years.

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# STAR GOOSEBERRY

Sayur Manis, Katuk, 马尼菜

You've probably seen this plant before but never knew its name! I call it Sayur Manis as it's what I called it growing up in Malaysia. It's a perennial that thrives in the tropics. Popular in Southeast Asia, 'manis' in Malay means sweet while 'sayur' means vegetable. The plant produces a fruit known as the gooseberry, but we're more interested in the leaves which add tonnes of nutrition to any dish.

**Make sure that your sayur manis leaves are cooked, because it is harmful to your health if eaten raw.**



## HOW DO I GROW IT?

You can grow it in a pot on your apartment balcony.

I've grown this perennial by stem cuttings. Literally just cut a 6inch-long stem, remove the thin leaf stems and stick the larger stem into soil.

Try to ensure that your pot is about 8inches in height to give the plant enough space to take root. Keep the soil moist as you propagate it giving it about 10-14 days for to root properly. After that water it 1 to 2 times per week.

It grows well in a potting mix rich with compost. You can start to harvest the leaves once it has established itself as a healthy plant and is about 2-3 feet tall.



Sayur manis plants growing in pots.



As you're likely growing it in your apartment balcony, make sure you prune it regularly. This will encourage more leaves to grow. To prune it just cut off the leaves and trim down the stems.

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# BRAZILIAN SPINACH

Sabu Spinach, Samba Lettuce, Sissoo Spinach

Did you know that this plant is also called 'Poor Man's Spinach'? Some say that it is named Brazilian Spinach because you can commonly find it in Brazil. Unlike other spinach varieties which are annuals, this versatile and hardy edible doesn't require replanting every season and will provide regular and abundant harvests once it is well established.



## HOW DO I GROW IT?

This spinach grows low to the ground and doesn't need much space. You can use a regular rectangular planter that is about 8 inches in height. You can hang this off your balcony railing or leave it on the ground, up to you!

Brazilian spinach is easily grown by stem cuttings. You can buy the spinach from your local market. Remove the leaves from the stem and leave it in a small cup of water. After 3-4 days once you see some roots, carefully pot it into your planter.

When the plant has established itself and grown to about half a foot you can start harvesting it.



Brazilian spinach leaves have a slightly uneven texture and surface .



As this spinach is crunchy, you can add small amounts to a salad. But don't consume too much of it raw as it contains oxalic acid which is harmful in large quantities. Cooking gets rid of the oxalic acid, so if you have large harvests be sure to cook most of the leaves before eating.

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# MORINGA TREE

Kelur, Merunggai, 辣木

There's so much to say about this tree. Most parts of it are edible: flowers, seeds, and leaves. But for this guide, I shall focus on the leaves only.

The moringa tree lives up to its many monikers "The Miracle Tree", "The Tree of Life," or "Never Die Tree" because of its amazing benefits and resilience. This perennial tree has offered my family a great amount of nutrition.

The moringa tree keeps me connected to my Sri Lankan heritage and keeps the dishes I grew up with present in my home today.



## HOW DO I GROW IT?



Moringa tree leaves are rounded at the tip.

Even though it's a tree, it doesn't need a lot of space. However, it will need a larger pot of about 15-inches in height to take root and have a sturdy base to grow.

You'll need to propagate this via a stem cutting. Cut a stem about 60cm long (the stem itself should have at least a 3cm thickness), gently remove leaves without injuring the bark and stick the stem in soil.



This is one perennial that prefers sunlight, and as much of it as it can get. So this is ideal if your balcony gets a lot of sun during the day.



As you're likely growing it in your apartment balcony, make sure you prune it regularly to keep it short and manageable. This will also encourage more leaves to grow. To prune it just cut off the leaves and trim down the stems.

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# SWEET POTATO LEAVES

Keledek

This plant's underground root is incredibly sweet and starchy! But apart from that, the leaves are also an easy to grow and a nutrient dense perennial! I'm now learning to grow sweet potatoes for both its starchy tubers and as a mainstay in the garden as a perennial leafy green. The latter serves as a perfect ground cover for all the urban food gardens we create.



## HOW DO I GROW IT?

You can grow sweet potato leaves in a regular planter box or container of about 8-inches in height, on your balcony.

Sweet potato leaves are grown from the sweet potato itself. Buy an organic sweet potato and place it in a shallow dish of water, so that only half of the tuber is submerged. In a few days, you'll notice vines and leaves sprouting from the potato. These are known as 'slips'. Cut these slips off and plant them in soil.

Alternatively, you can bury the sweet potato about 2-inches deep in soil, water it moderately daily and vines will slowly begin to emerge. Remember to allow the plant to establish itself with a generous number of vines and leaves before beginning to harvest.



Slips growing from a sweet potato.



Sweet potato leaves are great in a stir fry with some sambal belacan and dried prawns or in a simple stir fried with garlic.

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# GARLIC CHIVES

Chinese Leeks, Chinese Chives, 韭菜

Where do I begin? Garlic chives are great perennials to have as a cut and grow again plant. Mostly used as a herb, this plant survives in a not too sunny spot and doesn't need much space. Perfect for your container garden. I have moved my Garlic Chives to different locations and they've all survived well without much fuss. I've forgotten to harvest my garlic chives on occasion leading to a beautiful bloom of delicate white flowers, which are also edible!



## HOW DO I GROW IT?



Garlic chives growing in a pot.

Garlic chives can easily be planted in a rectangular planter box, about 8-inches in height.

You can grow them from seedlings bought from a nursery and propagate them by division as your plant flourishes. This just means that you take the plant out of the soil, split the roots, and replant them separately.

You can grow multiple seedlings in one container but just make sure to space the individuals about 2 to 3-inches apart from one another.



I feed my garlic chives with some vermicast a handful of times a year to give it a boost. You can buy some vermicast from Cultivate Central if you'd like to do the same.

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# WAS THIS HELPFUL?



I hope this guide was helpful!

Let me know if you ever have questions about growing these perennials on your balcony.

While you wait for your perennials to take root and begin growing, try out our Mighty Microgreens Kit. It's a great way to begin growing nutritious greens and developing your green thumb.

We also have other guides, videos, and courses on growing in small urban spaces. Subscribe to our Newsletter via our website if you'd like to learn to grow your own food.

Enjoy gardening!

*~Nova Nelson*







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