

A small balcony, a useful garden

Start with a few pots you can look after, rather than a space full of plants that all need something different.

By Rowan Ellis • 8 September 2026 • 3-minute read

Begin with one thing you will use.

A handful of herbs beside the kitchen can be more rewarding than an ambitious collection you rarely have time to tend.

Watch the space first

Before buying anything, notice where sunlight falls in the morning and afternoon. A sheltered corner and an exposed railing can feel like different gardens, even when they are only a few steps apart.

Think about how you already use the balcony. Leave room to open the door, sit down and reach the pots. A garden should make the space more enjoyable, not turn every trip outside into an obstacle course.

Give each pot a job

Choose a small group with similar light and watering needs. One pot might hold herbs you cook with often; another could bring flowers close to your chair. Read the plant labels and match them to the conditions you observed.

Use containers with drainage holes and a suitable potting mix. Put saucers where runoff would be a nuisance, but empty standing water after watering. Check building rules before adding heavy planters or attaching anything to a railing.

Make care easy to repeat

Keep a small watering can near the door. Look at the plants while you have your morning drink, and feel the soil before watering rather than following a rigid calendar.

Wind and warm weather can dry containers quickly. A pot that was damp yesterday may need attention today; one in a sheltered, shaded spot may not. That small habit of looking is more useful than buying another gadget.

Your first-week checklist

- Observe the light at two or three times of day.
- Keep a clear route from the door to your seat.
- Choose two or three manageable containers.
- Check drainage and protect the surface below.
- Pick plants suited to the space and your routine.
- Leave room to learn before adding more.

Let the garden earn its space

After a few weeks, notice what you enjoy using and caring for. Move a pot if it blocks the way, replace an unsuitable plant, and expand only when the first few feel easy. A useful garden grows from your habits, not from its size.