The First Harvest

A two-week workbook for a balcony vegetable garden

TOMÁS HERRERA

The First Harvest

A two-week workbook for a balcony vegetable garden

Tomás Herrera

Copyright © 2026 Tomás Herrera. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced without written permission from the author, except for brief quotations in reviews.

Contents

How to Use This Workbook 1
Week 1: Light, Pots and the First Sowing 3
Week 2: Water, Thinning and What Goes Wrong 9
The Last Page: Your Checklist and Your Harvest Log 15

How to Use This Workbook

Someone gave you a plant once and it died on a windowsill, and from that one death you concluded that you are not a person who can grow things. That is the wrong lesson. It probably died because it was in the wrong light, or because the pot had no hole in the bottom, or because nobody told you that compost in a pot dries out far faster than soil ever does in the ground.

Growing food in containers is not gardening shrunk down. It is a short list of habits: look honestly at the light you have, put the right seed at the right depth in fresh compost, and water it before it goes dry. Nearly everything else is detail. This workbook builds those habits over fourteen days, on a balcony, a windowsill, a doorstep, or a back step with room for three pots.

WHAT YOU WILL HAVE ON DAY 14

Not a harvest. You should hear that plainly now, because a good number of people give up in week two after being promised tomatoes in a fortnight. Seeds keep their own calendar and it is longer than ours.

What you will have is this: pots that drain, compost that suits them, seed sown at the right depth, seedlings up and thinned to the right spacing, a second sowing already made, and a watering routine that survives a busy week. The first leaves you can actually cut arrive somewhere in week three or four. The last page of this workbook is where you write the date they arrive.

THE SHAPE OF EACH DAY

Most days are fifteen to twenty minutes. Read the short lesson, go and look at your pots, then fill in the exercise. Three or four of the days ask a little more, because sowing and repotting take longer than looking.

The exercises are the point. They are not homework. They are the record you will want in six weeks when something goes wrong and you need to know what you sowed, when, and where you put it.

WHAT YOU NEED

Pots at least fifteen centimetres (six inches) deep with holes in the bottom, a bag of peat free multipurpose compost, two or three packets of seed, a watering can or a jug, and a place with light. Nothing in this book asks you to buy anything beyond that. No sprays, no feeds, no gadgets, no propagator. If you finish the fortnight wanting more equipment, you have read a different book.

ABOUT PRIYA

Priya turns up on most days. She is invented, so nothing she does is a claim about how well it works for anyone else. She is a first time grower in a first floor flat with a north facing balcony: bright enough to read on, but no direct sun except an hour of low, weak light at the end of a summer evening. That is the hardest common case, which is why she is in the book. If your spot is sunnier, your choices only get wider.

THREE RULES

1. Write in the book. Day 10 asks what you sowed on day 5, and you will not remember.
2. Buy nothing you were not told to buy. Every problem in this book is solved with your hands, a jug of water, or a fresh sowing.
3. When something dies, write down what you saw before it died. That note is worth more than the plant was.

Week 1: Light, Pots and the First Sowing

Days 1 to 7. This week you find out what your spot can actually support, put together somewhere for roots to live, and get seed into compost. By Sunday there should be something green.

DAY 1: WATCH THE LIGHT

Light is the one thing you cannot add, cannot fake, and cannot fix later, so it decides everything else. Today you measure it, and the measuring instrument is you.

At three points in the day, morning, the middle of the day, and late afternoon, go and stand where your pots will go. Note whether the sun is falling directly on that spot, whether it is bright but shaded, or whether it is genuinely dim. That is all. Do not estimate from memory or from which way the windows face, because a wall opposite, a balcony above, or a tree in leaf will change the answer completely.

Roughly, six hours or more of direct sun is a full sun spot and grows nearly anything. Three to six hours grows leaves, roots and herbs happily. Under three hours of direct sun, or bright shade with none, still grows salad leaves, spinach and chard, more slowly and more tenderly than a seed packet suggests.

Priya did this and did not like the answer: no direct sun at all until seven in the evening, and even then only on the left hand end of the rail. She wrote it down anyway. It saved her from buying tomato seed.

Exercise 1: Your light

1. Morning, what the spot looks like (direct sun, bright shade, or dim):
2. Middle of the day:
3. Late afternoon:
4. Total hours of direct sun, your honest guess:
5. The brightest single place you have, including windowsills indoors:

DAY 2: CHOOSE WHAT TO GROW

Now match the seed to the light instead of to the photograph on the packet. Beginners fail most often here, not later: they buy what looks exciting, put it in shade, and blame themselves when it sulks.

The rule is easy to remember. If you eat the leaf, it will cope with less light. If you eat the root, it wants more. If you eat the fruit, meaning tomatoes, peppers, chillies, courgettes, beans, it wants a lot of sun and will be miserable without it.

So a shady balcony grows loose leaf lettuce, rocket, mustard leaves, spinach, chard, parsley and mint. Three to six hours adds radish, spring onions and small beetroot. Full sun adds the fruiting crops, and only then are they worth the pot.

Also choose for speed. Your first grow should be something that comes up in a week and is edible in a month, because nothing teaches you more than seeing it work. Slower and fussier crops are for your second season, when a failure will not put you off.

Priya picked loose leaf lettuce, rocket and spinach, and one pot of radish as an experiment she was prepared to lose.

Exercise 2: Your shortlist

1. Which light band you are in, from Exercise 1:

2. Two leafy crops you would actually eat:

3. One faster crop as your experiment:

4. Something you wanted but the light rules out, written down so you stop wanting it this year:

DAY 3: POTS AND DRAINAGE

A pot is a container with holes in the bottom. A container without holes is a bucket, and seedlings drown in buckets. This is the single most common way a beginner's plant dies, and it is the easiest to prevent.

Depth matters more than width, because it is where roots go. Fifteen centimetres (six inches) of compost is enough for salad leaves, radish and spring onions. Chard and spinach are happier at twenty. Anything you plan to keep for months wants more.

Wider is kinder than narrow. A wide pot holds more compost, so it dries out more slowly and forgives a missed day. Small pots on a windowsill can go dry in a single warm afternoon.

You do not need to put gravel or broken pieces of pot in the bottom. It is old advice and it does not improve drainage; it just takes up room roots could use. Holes and a free draining compost are enough. If compost washes out of the holes, lay a scrap of mesh or a torn piece of paper over them for the first few waterings.

Check the drip, too. Water leaving your pot has to go somewhere, and on a balcony that somewhere is often a neighbour's washing. A saucer or tray under each pot solves it. Empty the tray after an hour rather than leaving pots standing in water for days.

Exercise 3: Your pots

1. How many pots you have, and how deep each one is:
2. Which of them already have drainage holes:
3. Which ones you need to make holes in, or replace:
4. Where the water will go when it runs out of the bottom:
5. What you will stand them on so the balcony is not permanently wet:

DAY 4: COMPOST, NOT SOIL

Fill your pots today, and fill them with bought peat free multipurpose compost rather than soil from a garden or a park.

The reason is structure. Compost sold for pots is made light and open so that it holds water without becoming airless, and roots need air as much as they need water. Garden soil behaves differently once it is confined to a container: it packs down, it sets hard when it dries, and it can arrive carrying weed seed and small unwelcome passengers. Nothing about it is ruined, it is simply the wrong material for a pot.

Fresh multipurpose compost also carries enough nutrients to feed a fast crop for its whole short life, which is why this book never asks you to buy a feed.

Fill each pot to about two centimetres below the rim. That gap is not decorative. Without it, water runs straight over the side instead of soaking in. Firm the compost gently with your palm, do not press it down hard, and water it lightly so it is evenly damp before any seed goes near it. Sowing into dry compost and watering afterwards mostly washes the seed sideways.

Exercise 4: Filling day

1. How much compost you bought, and how many pots it filled:
2. Whether you left the gap at the top, honestly:
3. How the compost felt after watering (evenly damp, dry in patches, soaking):
4. Anything left over and where you are keeping it dry:

DAY 5: SOW

Today is the day the workbook has been building to, and it takes about twenty minutes.

Depth is the thing beginners get wrong, almost always by going too deep. A seed carries only enough energy to push a shoot a certain distance up through compost. Bury it beyond that and it germinates in the dark, runs out of food, and dies without you ever knowing it existed.

> Sow a seed about twice as deep as the seed is wide. A radish seed is about the size of a peppercorn, so it goes roughly a centimetre down. A lettuce seed is a fleck, so it is barely covered at all.

Where the packet disagrees with a table, the packet wins, because it was written for that variety. But this is the shape of it:

What to sow	How deep	Days to come up	Ready in	Pot at least
Loose leaf lettuce	5 mm, barely covered	6 to 12	3 to 4 weeks, cut and come again	15 cm
Rocket and mustard leaves	5 mm	5 to 10	3 to 4 weeks	15 cm
Radish	1 cm	3 to 7	4 to 5 weeks	15 cm
Spinach	1 cm	7 to 14	4 to 6 weeks for small leaves	18 cm
Chard	2 cm	7 to 14	5 to 6 weeks for small leaves	20 cm
Spring onion	1 cm	10 to 14	8 weeks or more	15 cm

Sow thinly. The urge is to empty the packet, and the result is a mat of seedlings strangling each other. Scatter salad seed across the surface as if you were seasoning food, then sieve a thin layer of compost over the top. For radish, poke holes with a finger about two and a half centimetres apart and drop one seed in each.

Then water. Use a can with a fine rose, or a jug poured through your fingers to break the flow, so the seed is not washed into a corner. Keep half of each seed packet back. Day 11 needs it.

Exercise 5: The sowing record

1. Date sown:
2. What went into which pot, one line each:
3. How deep you sowed each one:
4. Where each pot is standing:
5. The date you should expect the first ones up, from the table:

DAY 6: LABELS AND A WATERING HABIT

Two small jobs today, and both of them are really about your memory.

Label everything. In three weeks a tray of seedlings all look like small green commas, and you will not be able to tell rocket from spinach, or remember whether the back pot was sown on Tuesday or the Tuesday before. A strip cut from a plastic tub and written on with pencil works as well as anything sold for the purpose. Write the crop and the date.

Then decide when you water. Not how often, when. A habit tied to something you already do survives; an intention to water when you remember does not. Priya waters after she puts the kettle on in the morning, because the kettle happens whether she is organised or not. Mornings are the better time: the pot has all day to use what you give it, and the surface dries before evening.

While the seed is still underground, the rule is different from later. The top centimetre of compost must not dry out, or germination stops partway and does not restart. That may mean a light water every day in warm weather. It never means a soaking; you are keeping a surface damp, not filling a reservoir.

Exercise 6: The habit

1. What every pot is labelled with:
2. The thing you already do every day that watering will attach to:
3. What time that happens:
4. Who waters when you are away for a weekend:

DAY 7: THE FIRST LOOK

A week in. Something may be up, and something may not, and today is only about noticing accurately.

Go and look closely at the surface. Radish and rocket are often through by now. Lettuce may be showing the first pair of seed leaves, which are plain, rounded and nothing like the leaves it will make later. Spinach and chard are usually still underground and that is fine. Nothing being up on day 7 is normal, not a failure.

Look for three things and write down what you see. First, whether the compost is drying out in one spot faster than another, which tells you about wind and sun on your balcony that no forecast will. Second, whether seedlings lean, which means the light comes from one side and the pot needs turning every couple of days. Third, whether seedlings are pale and stretched with a long thin stem, which means too little light: they will not recover, so the fix is to sow again somewhere brighter rather than to wait and hope.

Priya's rocket was up in five days and leaning hard toward the rail. Her lettuce took nine. Her spinach did nothing until day 12, by which time she had already written it off in the margin of this exercise and had to cross it out.

Exercise 7: Week one notes

1. What is up, and on which day it appeared:

2. What has not appeared yet, and the date it is due by:

3. Which pot dries fastest:

4. Anything leaning, pale or stretched:

5. The one thing you would do differently if you sowed again tomorrow:

Week 1 checklist

- ☐ I watched the light at three times of day and wrote down what I saw
- ☐ I chose crops that suit that light, not the ones I liked the look of
- ☐ Every pot I am using has holes in the bottom
- ☐ I filled the pots with fresh potting compost and left a gap at the top
- ☐ I sowed thinly, at roughly twice the depth of the seed
- ☐ Every pot is labelled with a crop and a date
- ☐ I kept half of each seed packet back for day 11

Week 2: Water, Thinning and What Goes Wrong

Days 8 to 14. The sowing is done. This week is about the two skills that keep a container garden alive, watering and thinning, and about recognising the handful of problems that account for most beginner failures.

DAY 8: WATER PROPERLY

Watering is where good intentions do the most damage. More container plants are killed by frequent little splashes than by drought, because a splash wets the top centimetre, the roots stay shallow to reach it, and the first hot day finds them with nothing to fall back on.

Once seedlings are up, water less often and more thoroughly. When you water, keep going until water runs out of the drainage holes. That tells you the whole depth of compost is wet, which is the only way roots learn to go down.

Then check before you water again rather than watering on a schedule. Push a finger into the compost to the first knuckle. Damp means wait. Dry at that depth means water. Lifting a small pot works too, because a dry pot is startlingly light.

What you have	Cool, dull weather	Warm, bright, or windy	How to check
A small pot or windowsill tray	Every 2 to 3 days	Daily, sometimes twice	Finger in to the first knuckle
A pot 20 cm or wider	Every 3 to 4 days	Every 1 to 2 days	Tilt it, a dry pot feels light
A window box in wind	Every 2 days	Daily	Wind dries a pot faster than sun does
Seed sown, nothing up yet	Keep the surface just damp	Light water daily	The top centimetre never goes dry

Water at the base of the plants rather than over the leaves, and water in the morning if you have the choice. If compost has gone properly dry and shrunk away from the sides, water runs down the gap and straight out, looking like a thorough soaking while the middle stays dry. Stand that pot in a few centimetres of water for half an hour instead and let it drink from below.

Exercise 8: Your watering log

1. Today's finger test, pot by pot (damp or dry):
2. Which pots you watered, and roughly how much:
3. Did water run from the holes:
4. The next date you expect to need to water:

DAY 9: WHEN NOTHING COMES UP

Some of your sowings have failed. This happens to everyone every year, and today you diagnose rather than despair.

Dig gently into a small patch with a fingertip and find a seed. What you see tells you which of four things happened. A seed that is plump and swollen but has not sprouted was probably too cold, and needs time rather than intervention. A seed that has sprouted underground with a long white shoot going nowhere was sown too deep. A seed that is unchanged and dry sat in compost that dried out at the wrong moment, which is the most common cause by a distance. And a seed that has vanished or gone soft and dark was too wet, or was old.

Old seed matters more than people expect. A packet that has been open in a warm kitchen drawer for three years will germinate patchily or not at all. If you inherited your seed, expect gaps and sow more thickly to compensate.

The fix in every case is the same and it is cheap: sow again, today, in the same pot. You lose nothing but a fortnight, and you have already learned the thing that made the first attempt fail.

Exercise 9: The diagnosis

1. Which pot has nothing showing:
2. What you found when you dug a fingertip in:
3. Which of the four causes fits best:
4. What you changed before sowing again:
5. Date of the resowing:

DAY 10: THIN THEM OUT

Today you pull out healthy seedlings and throw most of them away, and it will feel wrong. Do it anyway. Thinning is the difference between a pot of food and a pot of pale crowded stems that never amount to anything.

Seedlings that touch each other compete for the same water, the same compost and the same light, and every one of them loses. Crowding is also what causes seedlings to collapse at the soil line, keeling over overnight with a thin pinched stem, which happens where damp compost and still, stale air meet a dense mat of seedlings. Space and airflow prevent it. Once it starts in a pot, thinning hard and watering less is the only response you have.

Do it while they are small, at the first pair of proper leaves. Radish wants two and a half to five centimetres between plants, so each one has room to swell. Spinach and chard want ten to fifteen. Loose leaf salad is the exception: it can stay thick if you plan to cut leaves young, though even then thin the worst of the crowding.

Snip the extras at the base with scissors rather than pulling, so you do not disturb the roots of the ones you are keeping. The thinnings from lettuce, rocket and radish are edible. That is your first, very small harvest, and it counts.

Exercise 10: The thinning

1. Which pots you thinned, and the spacing you left:

2. How many plants remain in each:

3. Did you eat the thinnings, and what did they taste like:

4. Anything you found while thinning, such as collapsed stems or crowding you had not seen:

DAY 11: SOW AGAIN

Here is the habit that separates a garden from a one off experiment: sow a little more, every two weeks, all season.

A pot of lettuce sown on one day is ready on one day, and then it is over, and there is a gap of a month before anything else is edible. Sowing half as much twice as often gives you a steady trickle instead of a glut. This is why day 5 asked you to keep half of every packet.

Use the seed you held back. Sow it either in a fresh pot, or in the gaps left by the thinning on day 10, or in whatever the failures of day 9 left empty. Fresh compost for a fresh sowing where you can, since the last crop will have used some of what was there.

Priya sowed rocket every fortnight from March and stopped counting how many pots she had going. She also learned that on her balcony rocket did well and radish stayed small and mild, so from the second sowing onward she gave the radish pot to more lettuce and stopped fighting her light.

Exercise 11: Succession

1. What you sowed today, and where:

2. The date of the next sowing, two weeks from now:

3. Which crop is doing best in your conditions so far:

4. Which crop you will quietly give up on and replace:

DAY 12: PESTS AND PROBLEMS

Something will eat your plants. Almost all of it can be dealt with using your hands, a jug of water and five minutes of attention, and none of it in this book needs a spray.

Slugs and snails are the main culprits on a balcony and they leave ragged holes in leaves overnight. They do not fly in. They live under the pot rims, under the saucers, and in the dark damp gap where the pot meets the wall. Go out after dark with a light, or first thing after rain, lift the pots and look. Move what you find well away. Doing this three nights running usually ends the problem, because there were only ever a few.

Aphids are small green or black insects clustered on the newest growth and the undersides of leaves. Rub them off between finger and thumb, or knock them off with a firm squirt of water from the can. Repeat every few days for a week or so and the population collapses.

Birds pull at seedlings, and cats treat fresh compost as a convenience. Both are solved by covering the pot with something the plant can grow through and the animal cannot get past, or simply by moving the pot somewhere less accessible.

Yellowing lower leaves on a plant that has been in the same compost for many weeks usually means the compost has run out of what it had, and the honest answer here is a fresh sowing in fresh compost rather than a bottle of anything.

Exercise 12: What is happening to your plants

1. What damage you can see, described precisely (holes, nibbled edges, yellowing, curling):

2. What you found when you looked under the pots after dark:

3. What you did about it with your hands:

4. What the same leaf looks like three days later:

DAY 13: THE POT IS SMALLER THAN YOU THINK

Everything that goes wrong in the second month of container growing comes from the same fact: a pot holds a fixed amount of compost, and the compost holds a fixed amount of water and food.

That has practical consequences worth knowing now. A crowded pot dries out in hours rather than days, so late in the crop's life you will water more often than you did at the start, not less. Fresh multipurpose compost typically carries a fast crop through its whole life, roughly the four to six weeks a salad or radish needs, and then it is spent. And a plant whose roots fill the whole pot, circling at the edges when you tip it out, will not get bigger no matter what you do to it.

For the fast crops in this workbook, none of this is a crisis. They finish before the compost does. The answer at the end of a crop is to tip the spent compost out onto whatever else you grow, refill with fresh, and sow again. That is the whole cycle, and it is why this book never sends you shopping for a feed.

If you want to keep a plant longer, a herb or a chard plant you like, move it into a wider, deeper pot with fresh compost around the outside before it becomes potbound rather than after.

Exercise 13: The pots, honestly

1. Which pot dries out fastest now, compared with day 8:
2. Which crop will be finished first, and roughly when:
3. What you will sow in that pot next:
4. Anything you want to move into a bigger pot, and why:

DAY 14: PICKING, AND WHAT COMES NEXT

The last day of the fortnight, and mostly a day for looking forward, because the food is still ahead of you.

Loose leaf salad is the exception and may already be ready if it went in on day 5 and grew well. It is picked by cutting, not by pulling: take the outer leaves with scissors about two centimetres above the compost, leave the small centre leaves alone, and the plant regrows for another two or three cuttings. This is why it is called cut and come again, and it is the most forgiving thing a beginner can grow.

Radish is ready when the shoulder of the root shows at the surface and is roughly the width of your thumbnail. Pull one and look. Radish left too long turns woody and unpleasantly hot, so the rule is to pull early and often rather than to wait for size.

Spinach and chard are picked leaf by leaf from the outside once the plant has six or seven leaves, and will keep giving for weeks if you never strip a plant bare. Leave at least half the leaves on every plant, every time.

Whatever is ready, pick some today, even if it is four leaves and one small radish. Eat it while it is still warm from outside. That is the whole point of the exercise, and it is the moment that decides whether you sow anything next year.

Exercise 14: The first picking

1. What was ready enough to pick today:

2. How you picked it (cut, pulled, leaf by leaf):

3. What it tasted like:

4. What still needs another week or two, and the date you will check:

5. What you will sow in the next fortnight:

Week 2 checklist

- ☐ I water thoroughly until it runs from the holes, then wait and check with a finger
- ☐ I dug up a failed seed and worked out why it failed
- ☐ I thinned every pot that needed it, even though it felt wasteful
- ☐ I made a second sowing with the seed I held back
- ☐ I looked under the pots after dark for slugs and snails
- ☐ I know which crop suits my light and which one to stop growing
- ☐ I picked something and ate it

The Last Page: Your Checklist and Your Harvest Log

Fourteen days is not long enough to grow dinner, but it is long enough to stop being someone who cannot grow things. Everything below is either done or dated. Nothing on this page needs you to buy anything.

THE FINAL CHECKLIST

The first line is ticked already, because you did it on day 1 and it is the step almost everyone skips.

- ■ I found out how much light my spot actually gets, by standing in it
- ☐ I chose crops that match that light
- ☐ Every pot I use has drainage holes and somewhere for the water to go
- ☐ My pots hold fresh potting compost, filled to a gap below the rim
- ☐ I sowed at roughly twice the depth of the seed, and thinly
- ☐ Every pot is labelled with a crop and a date
- ☐ I water thoroughly and check with a finger before watering again
- ☐ I thinned to real spacing, not to what felt comfortable
- ☐ I have a second sowing already in compost
- ☐ I know the two most likely reasons a seed of mine fails to come up
- ☐ I have a date in mind for my first proper picking

WHAT HAPPENED

Fill this in as it happens, over the weeks after the workbook ends. It is the page you will want next spring.

1. Date of the first seedling, and what it was:

2. Date of the first thing I picked and ate:

3. What grew better than I expected:

4. What failed, and what I think went wrong:

5. What I will grow more of next time:

6. What I will not bother with again:

THE HARVEST LOG

One line each time you pick something: the date, the crop, and roughly how much. Keep going on a separate sheet when the lines run out. A short log across a season tells you more about your own balcony than any book can, including this one.

If the fortnight ended with one pot of leaning lettuce and everything else dead, you still know more than you did on day 1, and you know it about your own balcony rather than someone else's garden. Sow again. It costs a packet of seed and fourteen days, and the second attempt is nearly always the one that works.