
Living Homegrown Podcast – Episode 125 Growing Epic Edibles In Containers

Show Notes are at: www.LivingHomegrown.com/125

Theresa: This is the Living Homegrown podcast, episode 125.

Announcer: Welcome to the Living Homegrown podcast, where it's all about how to live farm-fresh without the farm. To help guide the way to a more flavorful and sustainable lifestyle is your host, national PBS TV producer and canning expert, Theresa Loe.

Theresa: Hey there, everybody. Welcome to the living Homegrown podcast. I'm your host, Theresa Loe, and this is where we talk about living farm-fresh without the farm. That can mean small space food growing, preserving the harvest, and just taking simple steps towards living a more sustainable lifestyle. We talk about all the different ways that you can live closer to your food, even if you have little or no garden space at all. If you'd like to learn more about any of these topics or my online courses or my membership site, just visit my website, livinghomegrown.com.

Today, we dive into small space gardening in containers. Now, I want to say small space gardening and containers, really, because I'm bringing on the author of a brand new book on container gardening, but everything that we talk about really can pertain to any small space. I think you'll really enjoy this conversation. I brought back Jessica Walliser. She's been on the podcast several times before. You may know her as the insect lady, because we've talked a lot about organic gardening and managing your insects, and how fascinating insects can be.

But today, I'm bringing her on because she has a brand new book coming out, and that book is called *Container Gardening Complete: Creative Projects for Growing Vegetables and Flowers in Small Spaces*. Now, it doesn't say it in the title, but Jessica is all about gardening organically and sustainably, so everything that she talks about in here is right up our alley. It's the same stuff that we talk about on the podcast all the time, and Jessica is definitely very knowledgeable on all of these subjects, especially anything to do with insects or organic gardening.

In case you've missed and not heard me talk about Jessica before, or remember the preview podcast that she's been on, let me just give you a little bit of a

backstory about Jessica. Jessica is a horticulturist and she co-hosts The Organic Gardeners, which is an award-winning program on KDKA Radio in Pittsburgh. Now, she is also a former contributing editor for Organic Gardening Magazine and a regular contributor to Fine Gardening, Urban Farm, and Hobby Farms magazines. Jessica also serves on the editorial advisory board for the American Horticultural Society. Her two weekly gardening columns for the Pittsburgh Tribune Review have been enjoyed by readers for over 10 years. Jessica's fourth book, *Attracting Beneficial Bugs to the Garden: A Natural Approach to Pest Control*, was awarded the American Horticultural Society's 2014 book award.

She is also the author of *Good Bag, Bad Bug: Who's Who, What Do They Do, and How to Manage Them Organically*, and the latest book is *Container Gardening Complete: Creative Projects for Growing Vegetables and Flowers in Small Spaces*. Additionally, Jessica also blogs weekly for savvygardening.com and hobbyfarms.com. Jessica is a very prolific writer and she really knows her stuff. I love having her on the show.

I was especially excited about this new book she has coming out. In fact, it's coming out on December 12th, I think, which is just a few days after this particular podcast episode comes out, but you'd be able to pre-order it if you were interested after listening. But the reason I was so excited about this book is I got to have a little bit of a sneak peek, and I absolutely love it. Because although this book is really for container gardening, I really feel like it covers so much more. You really are getting a lot of bang for your buck. For example, it covers all the information for ... you know, the typical information you would find in a container book, like choosing your container and your potting mix and location and sunlight and watering and all of that, and it also covers container gardening design.

But from there, it goes so much deeper, and that's really the part that I'm excited about. Because honestly, I feel as if this book is ... Although it's great for container gardening, I really feel it's fantastic for all small space gardening, not just gardening in containers. So if you are someone who wants to grow vegetables or ornamentals and you have very little space, then this is the episode for you.

I will let Jessica tell you all the details of what is important for us to remember whenever we're gardening in small spaces or in containers, but remember, everything that we talk about will be in the show notes for this episode. To get to the show notes, you just go to livinghomegrown.com/125, and I'll have everything right there for you. With that, let me share my interview with Jessica Walliser, the author of *Container Gardening Complete*.

Hey, Jessica. Thanks so much for coming back on the podcast.

Jessica: Thank you so much for inviting me.

Theresa: Last time you were here, we talked about this book coming out, and now, when this particular episode is released, your new book, Container Gardening Complete, will be released within a few days of this episode. I'm super excited that I got to see a little bit of a sneak peek of the book and that you're willing to come on and share about it because I have to tell you, right off the bat, this is by far the best container gardening book I have ever seen. You really dive deep on this one.

Jessica: Well, thank you so much. I'm very, very pleased to hear you say that. That was one of the goals. My publisher is Cool Springs Press, and they came to me with the idea of doing a container garden book, and we really sat down and put our heads together because we wanted to make a book that was unlike any other container gardening book on the market, and that really didn't just talk about designing pretty flowers in containers, but really dove deep into the subject of container gardening and doing it successfully. We wanted to maximize the amount of information that we could give to people, and thankfully, Cool Springs Press was good with it, because it is a big, beefy book and it's chock full of information and charts and photographs. There's hundreds of pictures in there. It was a lot, a lot of fun to write and I'm so pleased to hear you say that, that you enjoy it so much.

Theresa: I absolutely do. I really, really do. And I want to dive really deep into what's in the book, but before we start into that, in case someone has never heard you on my podcast before, because you've been on a couple times, I'd love for you to first just tell everybody a little bit about what it is that you do, so a little bit of background on you.

Jessica: Sure. I am a horticulturist by trade. I have a bachelor's degree in horticulture. I do a bunch of different things, as I think a lot of people in the garden communications realm have to do. We've got to have our fingers in a lot of different pies to make a living. Container Gardening Complete is actually my fifth book. I also host a radio program in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on a Sunday morning, called The Organic Gardeners, and we are actually in our twelfth season-

Theresa: Wow.

Jessica: ... on a news radio station, which is pretty amazing to be on the same station for 12 years.

Theresa: Yes.

Jessica: Yeah, and I also write gardening columns for the Pittsburgh Tribune Review. I have two columns a week that I've been doing for just about 10 years for the paper. And then I write for lots of different magazines like Fine Gardening, and I

used to write for Organic Gardening Magazine when that was around. I write a lot for Hobby Farms, and then I also own a website with a few other garden writers called Savvy Gardening. It's savvygardening.com, and that's a place where we can commiserate and offer advice and knowledge on all different kinds of aspects of gardening.

Theresa: Well, you're absolutely a walking encyclopedia, and one of my go-to people, especially for insects, because that's what we've had you on talking about before because of your insect book. But I was really excited that you were doing this topic on container gardening, because everything you ever do, you always do it really thoroughly. It's always well-researched. I know I can trust the information, and that's why I recommend them very highly for that reason. I was curious when you decided to do a container gardening book, what led you to want to do that particular subject?

Jessica: It's interesting, because the publisher, we'd been talking about doing a book together for a while, and we were trying to find the right topic fit for me. When they came to me and they said, "You know, we really want to do an updated, modern version of container gardening that's really suitable for a whole new generation of gardeners, and obviously we want to appeal to established and long-time gardeners as well." And they said, "Do you think this is something you'd be interested in doing?" I said, "Well, yeah, but if I can do it in a way that's different from all the other container garden books that are out there." And they were, "Okay, well, go ahead and get an outline together."

People that know me know my outlines, man, they're super detailed, because that's what I actually do my writing from. I write directly from the outline, so every little detail has to be in that outline in order for me to remember to put it in the book when I get to the writing part, and they must have liked what they saw. They must have seen enough new and creative ideas and projects and plans in the outline that they jumped right on board, and we took it and we ran with it. They were wonderful to work with. I honestly had a great experience with them, and it's just so cool to see a project that takes this long; nine, ten months. To see it come to fruition is always a really exciting thing.

Theresa: Yeah, it's probably kind of like having kids. It's painful to go through, but you're so excited when you're all finished.

Jessica: Right, exactly. And you have something to show for it at the end, which is awfully a good feeling.

Theresa: Yes. Yeah, absolutely. Well, let's talk a little bit about what makes this book different, because I noticed it right off the bat. First of all, it's got, like you said, it has a lot of information. But to me, it almost ... It filled in the gaps for what I felt was missing from some of the other books I've seen on the market through the years. What did you purposely put in this book to make it different?

Jessica: We wanted to get the basics, of course, which are what I call in the book the three pillars of successful container gardening. It's basically the three corners that establish a good, healthy foundation and start for your container garden. That concept is actually introduced in the very first chapter, which is just getting started in container gardening. What are the things that I have to look for and do to get myself ready for success.

I do delve into designing containers as well, because I think that's pretty important. It's a pretty intimidating thing for people. They're not sure where to put plants in there and how do you arrange your containers together to actually be attractive. I would say the information that you find in designing, it's interesting, it's fascinating, and it's cool. But it's also not groundbreaking, because the design things, people have been talking about designing containers forever.

But what really, for me, gets into the meat and bones of container gardening are where the book goes from there, which is some great advice on caring for containers. It goes way beyond make sure you water them, which is what so many container gardening books say, you know? Just make sure you water them and that's it. But we, in this book, dive super deep into different types of fertilizers. Into maintenance techniques. We have some cool plans for trellises, for pots, and ways to use upcycled materials to create a trellising system or caging system for your plants.

Then I get into troubleshooting, which is almost always completely skipped in container gardening books, as if no container gardeners ever have problems with bugs or deer eating their containers, or groundhogs. But the truth is, even when you grow in containers, you have these issues, and sometimes more. You know, sometimes you have them more so, because if you're in an urban area, those might be the only plants around for insects to eat. You sometimes face increased insect pressure. So there's a literal step-by-step guide in identifying and handling diseases, in identifying pests, and how do you manage them organically? We look at animals and what's that chipmunk doing to your container, and why is it digging it all up, and what can you do about it?

Then of course, towards the end of the book, we get into what happens at the end of the year? What do you do when the growing season is over with those pots? People who grow tropicals where I live in Pittsburgh, if you're growing a tropical in a container and you paid \$85 for that giant brugmansia at the start of the gardening season, the last thing you want to do is throw it away at the end of the year. So we really wanted to make sure that we included info in the book in overwintering all of these plants, so that we can enjoy them year after year after year. I've got a tons of tips and ideas in there for seeing these plants through the winter, even if you live in a small apartment or in a little cottage home. How are you going to successfully get these plants to survive the winter

so that you can enjoy them again next year?

Theresa: Yes. Yes, when I saw that, I was like, this is such good information, because no one talks about that. I almost think that a lot of books treat container gardens as if they're throwaway gardens. They're not at all. They don't have to be. You're right, you've made an investment, not only of money, but of your time. And if you can take that plant and carry it over to the next year through the winter, when you have a very cold area, than that makes it even more worth your time and your investment. I loved that, and I loved the troubleshooting guide. That was really what caught my eye first, because I know you're the bug lady. You really understand insects really well, and you tell everybody organic solutions and how to keep a balance. That is so, so important. It's not just about spraying willy-nilly, because you can upset the whole ecosystem. You're very, very intentional with your instructions and your troubleshooting, so it's just really fantastic.

But even in the section on ... You also have in there something you didn't touch on, which is DIY projects, which you have sprinkled throughout the whole book. I was going to ask you at the end, but I want to ask you now about that, because that is something that I felt took it over the top. There were things in there like ... You had a squash growing in trash cans with trellis overhead, so that you could put it in your walkway or your pathways of your garden. You have all kinds of really interesting DIY projects, so could you just touch on some of the projects that you included in the book?

Jessica: Sure! These, for me, were just the most fun. I had so much fun coming up with these projects, and then I also got to grow them. I got to have models that build them. I got to shoot the photos for it, so I did all the photography. Every picture in the book is my own, as well, which was more a hobby of mine than a profession, but I was really thrilled with the way the pictures turned out and how accepting the models were of the crazy things I asked them to do, because none of them were really gardeners. So that was pretty fun to do. Some of them were, but not all of them were. So it was cool to be able to come up with and design and then create and photograph these really wonderful projects.

Some of my favorite ones in there, we did a homemade DIY self-watering container. If people are familiar with the self-watering containers that you can get commercially, they're pretty darn expensive, especially the really big ones. So I've got a plan and design, and it's all step-by-step in there, how to build your own out of just some plastic storage bins that you can buy at the hardware store. That was really cool.

We've got a berry gardening one in there. That's just a patio-sized berry garden, where you can grow strawberries and blueberries, or you could do gooseberries in there or currants, or whatever berry you favor, and grow your own berry crop. I have a really cool project in there that is woodworking. I have two,

actually. One is a really cool cedar wooden planting box, and then the other is a wooden pot dolly, so that you could wheel ... You know, if you have a small deck and it only gets sun for part of the day on one corner, that you could actually wheel your tomato plant from one side of the deck to the other really easily with just a couple pieces of scrap wood and this design and the steps that are included in the book, so that's a really fun one.

I've got a hypertufa planter in there that goes beyond the hypertufa plans that you find online that are using a little, tiny cardboard box to make a hypertufa ... That is a hard word.

Theresa: That is hard to say, I know.

Jessica: Hypertufa trough, but this one is how to do a big, giant bowl, and it was one of my favorite projects from the book. I think there's about 20, maybe 22 projects scattered throughout the book, and everything from ornamentals to edibles. The squash that you mentioned was another really cool one.

I also was lucky in that I had great neighbors and great friends who let us set up the projects and shoot the photographs at their house, and then they took care of those containers so I could get a picture later in the season, when the things had all grown. It was really quite a process to go through last summer in doing all of these projects, but I really think it makes the book pretty special and pretty unique amongst container gardening books.

Theresa: Yes, absolutely. It's really well photographed. I was able to look through the pictures and see exactly how things went together and how to make it. Definitely, like you said, step-by-step. And there's also one DIY project that I thought was really great, which is the pollinator can. Before we dive into growing vegetables, could you just talk about the pollinator can? Because I think that's a really important thing, to have pollinating plants if you're going to grow vegetables.

Jessica: Yeah. And you know what? Even if you're not a vegetable grower, I think it's super important to do what you can to provide habitat for pollinators. I mean, you know, we've mentioned bugs multiple times already in this interview, but they're a true passion of mine, and so many of our native pollinators are facing population declines. Container gardeners a lot of times feel like there's nothing they really can do to help pollinators, because they just have a couple of containers on their deck or their porch, and they don't really feel like they're making a big difference. But the truth is, if everybody built a pollinator habitat container garden and put them out on that small patio or deck collectively, we can make a huge difference in the health of pollinators. It's about selecting the right plans, caring for them organically so that we're not accidentally introducing a pesticide to those plants that could affect those pollinators, and it's about leaving the habitat year round.

The pollinator can project uses a mixture of ornamental plants and grasses, and then we also have some artificial nesting habitats in that projects well, so I teach you how to make a nesting block for tunnel or cavity nesting native bees, and then we also use bamboo poles also for tunnel nesters in there as well. We put them all together with plants and we do it in a galvanized trashcan, although you could use any container that you wanted, to really create a mini-habitat for these insects.

You mentioned it being important for vegetable gardeners in particular, and that's absolutely true. The reason being is if you're in the city and you have a container garden full of vegetables that need to be pollinated by insects, but you don't have any flowers there beyond those on your vegetables, you're not going to have many pollinators, and you're probably going to have poor fruit set as a result. In order to maximize production of the containerized vegetable garden, you have to have flowers. This pollinator can project is essential to put with those container veggies so that you make sure you have enough pollinators around.

Theresa: Yes, very good. You said it perfectly. That's why I always encourage people to include flowers and native plants when they want to grow veggies, but I'm so glad you included it here, because that's another thing that is not usually inside any kind of book on container gardening. I think the audience can already tell that this is more than just let's plant up a pot of pretty flowers. This is a really deep dive book, and you've covered all the really important things, at least the things that I think are super important. But I would love to talk a little bit about maybe what are some of your favorite things that we could grow that are edibles? What are some good edibles that we could grow in containers? Because a lot of my listeners have very small spaces, and so container gardening, I know, is something that they're very interested in.

Jessica: Yeah. I guess the thing to realize with container gardening when you're talking about vegetables, is you really can grow any vegetable in a pot. But the important thing becomes, then, you have to pick the right sized pot. On our radio show, again, that I host here in Pittsburgh, we get a lot of people who call about they grew a tomato and it had horrible blossom end rot, and they grew it in a pot, and we say, "Well, how big was the container that you grew that tomato in?" And they say, "Well, it was a five gallon bucket." And then we say, "Well, what kind of tomato did you grow?" And then they say, "Just a regular old tomato."

They don't understand why it didn't perform well in that little tiny five gallon volume of potting soil. So if you're going to grow a full-sized tomato plant and you're going to want to get it to be six feet tall with big, giant beefsteak tomatoes, then you're going to need a pot that's more like 15, 20, 25 gallons of potting soil. That plant simply cannot sustain itself. It can't get enough water, it

can't get enough nutrients from that little, tiny pot. It basically can't perform to its fullest. But maybe a dwarf tomato would be a better choice, if all you have the room for is a five gallon pot. You just have to be smart about the varieties that you choose to plant in that container vegetable garden based on the size of the containers that your garden can handle.

It's great. If you can have huge, gigantic, 20 gallon pots for each tomato, that's fantastic. You can plant whatever tomatoes you want. But if you don't have that much space, then you just have to be really smart about which tomato varieties that you choose. Thankfully, there are more and more varieties of small-statured or what we call patio-type tomatoes on the market every day. I mean, breeders are seeing a huge amount of potential for customers who are seeking out these patio-sized varieties. Just looking for something like a determinate or patio-type tomatoes. They only get to be, in most cases, three or four feet in height. There's a ton of varieties. One of my favorites is called Mountain Princess. There's another one called Totem that I absolutely love. They're great patio choices.

There's also dwarf cherry tomatoes out there now, and sometimes you see them at the nursery and they'll be in a hanging basket, or a really small container because they only get to be, some of them, only 18 to 24 inches long, so they're real tiny, petite plants. Those would be varieties like Red Robin or Tiny Tim. There's one called Small Fry that's really cool. I think just looking at it in terms of a proper partnership between the container size and the particular variety of vegetable is going to go a long way toward guaranteeing your success. It's not just with tomatoes. There's dwarf varieties of corn. There's dwarf varieties of squash, of radish, of beets, of watermelon. They're tailored, they're bred specifically for growing in containers.

I've done all the hard work for people in that I have done a ton of research on these varieties of vegetables, and so in the book, in the chapter that talks about making smart plant choices, I have all of these charts. I have one that is great vegetables for containers, and it talks specifically about which cultivars to look for. What's a good pumpkin for a container? Well, here you go. Here's the list of all the cultivars you want to look for.

I've got one that's herbs. Great herbs. Dwarf basil versus full-size basil. There's a big difference in the two of those for containers. I've got small trees, a chart on those. A chart on tropicals. It's really handing you tailored information specifically for container growing so that you quite literally have everything you need to be successful.

Theresa: Yes. So glad you mentioned the charts. There's a lot of ... That's just another thing. You have a lot of charts and worksheets and everything in here that makes it all really, really simple. I'm so glad that you mentioned that. I think the value in the book, just on those charts alone, pays for the book. Because the

amount of time it takes to research that, and you've kind of done it all for everybody. That's just fantastic.

I also want to make sure people know that just because something is a dwarf variety, doesn't necessarily mean that you're not going to get a very large crop. There's a lot of these plants that even though they're small, they're really productive. If you want to have a lot of tomatoes, you can grow more than one, but sometimes, just having one of each plant gives you plenty of variety and just the right amount for you, so that nothing goes to waste.

Jessica: That is an excellent point, and I'm really glad that you brought it up, because people think if it's a dwarf plant, then the fruits are going to be dwarf automatically. If we're talking about winter squash or something like that, a butterbush, which is a dwarf variety of winter squash, that the full developed fruit on a butterbush is the same size as a butternut. It just happens to be growing on a much smaller vine. The fruit size is the same.

Of course, there are ... With peppers, you know, the pepper plants are dwarf sized and there's also some that have dwarf sized fruit as well. You do have to look into these specific varieties, but for the most part, it's full-sized fruit on a little, tiny plant.

Theresa: Very, very good. Yes, absolutely. You also do cover trees, you mentioned that. There are a lot of fruit trees that can be grown in containers. I actually do grow a lot of my fruit trees in containers, because I have a very small postage-sized stamp of property here. But you go into that, and which ones work and which ones don't. I want people just to understand that they can also grow fruit. You talk about apples and pears, and all the different varieties of berries, also, that people can grow. It's not just vegetables that you're covering in here. You also cover ornamentals.

Jessica: We do, yeah. I want to mention real quick with that fruit, people a lot of times think that the only fruits they can grow in a pot are strawberries, because they're very tiny plants. But peach trees, if you have the right variety and you know which variety to seek out, you can grow full-sized peaches on genetically dwarf fruit trees if you know which variety to ask for, and you can grow them in a pot that isn't very large. Maybe 20, 30 gallon pot, which is not real huge, and you can have them for years and years and years if you overwinter them properly with the techniques that I talk about in the book. Just don't get stuck in what you think you can do in containers, because the possibilities are really endless.

Of course, there is no more endless supply of possibilities than there are with ornamentals. Annuals, perennials in containers, trees, flowering shrubs. All of these make wonderful home accents, decorative accents to the patio or porch, and they can create great habitat for insects and other wildlife in the garden as

well, and they can really add a lot of personality to your landscape. Truly endless possibilities with ornamentals. Obviously I have my favorites, as every gardener does, but you can do just about any one of those plants in a container, as long as, again, you choose the correct size container.

Theresa: You also do cover design, which you mentioned. When you are doing even edibles, you can mix and match. You can have a pot with just edibles, and you can have a pot that has ornamentals and have them next to each other. I was just amazed at how beautiful your photographs were, because you did a lot of mixing and matching of the different things that you could grow together. I guess it was just very inspiring.

I was looking at pictures, and one thing that is in there is you have a recipe for how to put that exact pot together. So if someone sees something, they're like, "Oh, I want a pot that looks like that on my front porch," you do name every single plant, and someone can go out and replicate it. That makes it even more of a DIY. You don't even have to think. It's all there for you.

Jessica: Right, and you can use it ... If you're new and this is your first year container gardening and you're really nervous, you can use one of those recipes to a T. You can go to your garden center. These are commonly available plants at most local garden centers. You can go in and you can say, "I want this list of plants," and you can make an exact replica of that container.

Then when you get a little bit more experience under your belt and you want to step away from those recipes a little bit, swap out some plants, try some new things. There's still plenty of opportunity to do that, plenty of options presented in the book as well for doing that. Then with the designing, we often hear about the whole thriller, filler, and spiller concept, which is an upright plant, then one in the middle layer, which we call the filler, and then something spilling out over the edge of the container. That's the core, basic design of containers, and I think most gardeners are familiar with that concept by now.

But I also, in the book, introduce other concepts for designing containers that go beyond that. Ones that are flat in the back, ones that are on a single plane. What they can offer with pictures of how each one of these design examples look, so that you can say, "Okay, you know what? I really like that, but I need a little more height, so what plant can I go with?" To use that design, but create it using a different type of plant so that you can get a different type of feel out of it.

I didn't mean earlier to dismiss the importance of designing your containers properly, because it can really make or break your enjoyment, especially of ornamentals in containers, but it's something that for me, I think a lot of gardeners already have a good basis on that thriller filler spiller concept, at least of the design. But yeah, I go deeper into other types of designs as well.

Theresa: Yeah, and I'm glad you talked about that, too, because I do have a lot of beginners who are listeners as well. In fact, since there are so many beginners, is there anything that you find when people are starting to do container gardening for the first time, is there a common mistake or the biggest mistake that people usually make that we could tell everyone about so they could avoid that mistake?

Jessica: I think probably the biggest mistake that people make with container gardening is buying cheap potting soil to fill their containers. Just like anything else in life, you get what you pay for with potting soil. If you just go to the hardware store and you pick up a bag of the cheapest potting soil that you find, it's going to be pretty lousy potting soil. Quality matters so much. When you don't set yourself up for success right from the start by choosing a good quality potting soil or making it yourself, actually, you're just automatically getting off on the wrong foot, and you're not going to have as great of a chance of success.

Getting good quality potting soil, I actually have recipes in the book. Potting soil can be pretty expensive, especially at my house, I have probably three dozen pots in my little, tiny yard, and if I bought bagged potting soil for all of those pots, that would be my gardening budget for the whole year. So I buy the raw ingredients and mix and make my own potting soil to save a whole lot of money, and I make my own fertilizer to go in it as well, based on all the natural ingredients that I buy on my own like alfalfa meal and green sand and lime. I have recipes in the book, again, on how to mix those up to blend them into your potting soil. That saves me a ton of money and it allows me to fill a lot more containers than it would if I was buying a commercial mix, and I have more control over which potting soil I use for which plant.

For example, I love succulents, and I grow a lot of succulents. But the potting mix I use for succulents is a lot grittier. It's a different texture than the potting soil mix I use to grow my tomatoes and my containerized watermelons. You can tailor it a lot more when you make your own from scratch. People make an enormous mistake by planting everything in the same potting soil and picking the cheapest potting soil that they can find. Then they wonder why their plants don't do well. It's because they're not setting themselves up for success right out the gate.

Theresa: That's a really good point, because I think what we tend to forget is that that plant in that container, that's all they've got. It's not like a plant in the soil, where it can reach out its roots and go to another area. Having something really quality, that's very important. And I love that you let us geek out a little bit, if we want to really go down that path of getting all scientific and creating our own things. That's kind of fun.

Jessica: Yeah, it is. And you know what, with the fertilizer, the point of the fertilizers,

people think that when a plant is growing in a pot, and you bring up the point that a plant in a container only having that small volume of soil to grow in and that's it, that's all they have. People realize that, but then they think they can make up for it by dumping on extra fertilizer, and they think, "I'm just going to use that blue water soluble stuff and I'm just going to pour it on there and my plant's going to have everything it needs, and it's going to do its best."

But that's not true. That's like feeding your kid junk food or fast food and then giving them a vitamin and thinking that's going to make up for it nutritionally. I mean, it just doesn't. So, yes, you can ... Your plants do have that little volume of soil. Yes, you should be using supplemental fertilizer. But what's most important is that you use a good, high-quality potting soil mixture to grow those plants right from the start. That's the nutrition that they need. And any fertilizer that you add in excess of that is just the vitamin on top of an already healthy diet, and that's an important point to get across. I think it's one that really, again, will set you up for success right out the gate.

Theresa: I love that analogy, that's perfect. I really do. That's good. I think everyone will get that, so thanks for explaining it that way. That way, everyone will remember. It'll be something like, "Oh, I don't want to just feed my plant a vitamin. I'm going to get that good soil."

Jessica: There's even good vitamins and bad vitamins too, right?

Theresa: Yes, yes.

Jessica: This book comes at container gardening from a completely organic standpoint. That's who I am and what I do, is all organic. So I'm not going to tell you to use that water soluble blue liquid fertilizer. Instead, what I tell you to do, and I explain all the different organic liquid fertilizers out there and what they offer to plants. Which one is better? What do you do? Do you do fish emulsion? Do you do liquid kelp? Do you do compost tea? Do you do liquid seaweed? What are the benefits and the downfalls of each one of those, and how can you use that to maximize the production of these container plants?

Again, that's not something that most container garden books dive into. In fact, I don't know any that do, but it's really, really important stuff, because if we're going to tell people, "Don't use chemicals, don't use that blue water soluble fertilizer, because it's junk food," then what we have to do is we have to present them with a viable alternative that they can get at a local garden center and that will feed their plants properly. You can't just say no and then not give them another choice. This book dives deep into all of those other choices so that you can have a beautiful, healthy garden but you can do it without relying on all of those chemicals.

Theresa: Yes. That is so important, because I think that's probably one of the biggest

questions I get. "Well, if I'm going to switch off of using a synthetic fertilizer, what do I use?" It's a very common question, and I love that you broke it down as to the pros and cons of what each one does, because there's always pluses and minuses to everything. Having all that information at our fingertips will make all the difference.

Well, Jessica, I can't thank you enough for coming on the show and really diving deep into this subject, because a lot of people out there just don't have a lot of space, and this may be a great way for them to start or to expand their garden. I really appreciate you coming on and sharing all about your new book. I'm so excited that it's going to be releasing right as this podcast comes out.

Jessica: Well, thank you so much and I'm happy as well that Container Gardening Complete is coming up just in time for the holidays. That was good timing, wasn't it?

Theresa: Perfect, perfect timing. Thank you so much.

Jessica: Thank you.

Theresa: Well, I hope you enjoyed that interview with Jessica Walliser, the author of Container Gardening Complete. Now, remember, everything that we talked about, I will have in the show notes for you. If you'd like to get to the show notes, just go to livinghomegrown.com/125. I hope you realize that if you have a small space, you can grow vegetables. You can grow them in containers or in a little tucked-away corner. All you really need is the sunlight and the gumption to do it. With that, I hope you have a fantastic day. I really appreciate that you took time out of your busy day to listen to this podcast. Until next time, just try to live a little more local, seasonal, and homegrown. Take care.

Announcer: That's all for this episode of the Living Homegrown podcast. Visit livinghomegrown.com to download Theresa's free canning resource guide and find more tips on how to live farm-fresh without the farm. Be sure to join Theresa Loe next time on the Living Homegrown podcast.