

Renee's Articles: Grow a Pizza Garden: Gardening with Children:

Growing a pizza garden is a great way to get children outdoors and motivated to plant and eat vegetables. Our family loves homemade pizza, so my 4-year-old daughter and I have already started planning our pizza plot. So far, our seed list includes several kinds of tomatoes, peppers, onions, garlic, basil, arugula, rosemary and black beans - one not-so-traditional topping which was her idea. In the summer, when our garden is ready, we hope to host a pizza-baking garden party for her friends.

Unable to find a local pizzeria whose pizza I liked, I've become a homemade pizza fanatic. To make a crispy, chewy crust, I purchased a pizza stone. They aren't expensive and many come with a pizza cutter, wooden paddle, and recipes for dough. Fresh mozzarella cheese has also become more widely available, and tastes better than the processed kind that many pizzerias use.

It's very easy to make your own sauce by sautéing fresh peeled, seeded and mashed tomatoes with fresh oregano, garlic and a little olive oil. Now that we have the stone, we eat pizza much more often. My daughter enjoys arranging the toppings artistically on the pie. If I am pressed for time, I buy ready-made pizza dough, mozzarella, and a can of sauce from our local coop and then added fresh vegetables or basil on top, as the entire assembly takes about 10 minutes!

Pizza Garden Design

A pizza garden can be any size or shape, and can easily be grown in containers on a sunny patio or terrace. It is most fun, however, to make it the circular in the shape of a pizza pie, with triangular slice-shaped beds containing different vegetables and herbs. If the plot is large, the slices can be divided by narrow pathways, so that you can reach the plants in the center. In smaller pizza gardens, you can use bricks, stones, wood, mulch—or even the spokes of a wagon wheel. If you have a very small space, you could restrict the circle to compact plants like pizza herbs.

No matter how large your garden space, make sure to loosen your soil to at least a foot in depth, and amend it with well-rotted manure or compost, and a balanced organic fertilizer. If you are using containers, make sure they are big enough for the plants you plan to grow, and add granular slow-release fertilizer to the mix, since frequent watering drains nutrients quickly. Most pizza plants are sun-lovers; so need 6-8 hours of sunlight for best production and flavor.

Recommended Varieties for a Pizza Garden:

Tomatoes: [Italian Pompeii](#) is the quintessential Italian sauce tomato—these indeterminate plants produce loads of firm elongated red fruits. I also like to grow red, orange and yellow [Garden Candy](#) and juicy [Camp Joy](#) cherry tomatoes for slicing and baking directly on pizzas, or for making "sun-dried" tomatoes in a dehydrator.



Renee's Garden Seed shopping list:

- ["Jewel Toned" Peppers](#)
- ["Pizza my Heart" Peppers](#)
- ["Southwestern Trio" Peppers](#)
- ["True Greek" Oregano](#)
- ["Rustic" Arugula](#)
- ["Salad Leaf" Basil](#)
- ["Profuma di Genova" Basil](#)
- ["Italian Pesto" Basil](#)
- ["Scented Trio" Basil](#)
- [French Rosemary](#)
- ["Gigante" Parsley](#)
- ["Italian Trio" Eggplants](#)
- ["Romanesco" Zucchini](#)
- ["Garden Candy" Tomatoes](#)
- ["Camp Joy" Tomatoes](#)

To purchase these and other Renee's Garden Seeds [click here](#)

Try these great recipes from Renee's cookbooks:



[Santa Fe Style Pizza](#)
[Tuscan Pizza](#)



Peppers: For a colorful pizza, grow [Jewel Toned Sweet Bells](#) in red, orange and gold. For extra crunch, [Pizza my Heart](#) is a thick-walled, elongated sweet pepper with just a hint of heat. It grows on a compact bush, making it well-suited for container gardens. [Southwestern Trio](#) chile peppers have three different heat levels, from mild to hot.

Oregano: The sweetest and most flavorful variety for fresh eating is [True Greek](#). Many other Italian types taste too hot, spicy or bitter. I use this oregano all year, so grow as many plants as I can fit. Hang small bunches upside down in a dark, warm (but not over 90 degrees), well-ventilated place for two weeks until they are dry. Then, gently roll the bunches between your hands onto paper to quickly remove the leaves. Funnel into mason jars, and store in a dark place.



Arugula: My absolute favorite arugula for pizza is [Rustic Arugula](#). Since it's perennial, it lasts all season in the garden, whereas annual arugula goes to seed faster and must be continually replanted. I think it also has the most delicate flavor, and its finely cut dark green leaves contrast beautifully with the white cheese and red sauce, to make the colors of the Italian flag! Top pizza with arugula just before serving instead of baking it, since it will quickly burn to a crisp in a hot oven.



Basil: Good choices for pizza include the extra-large [Salad Leaf Basil](#), and the spoon-shaped and fragrant [Profuma di Genova](#) (another compact plant for containers). For abundant harvests of basil for pesto, try [Italian Pesto Basil](#). Another of our favorite pizzas, which makes an excellent party appetizer, is spread with pesto and topped with slow-cooked caramelized onions. Menus in gourmet pizzerias often include pesto pizza topped with chicken, as well as goat cheese pizza, which you might want to try with [purple basil](#). As with arugula, add basil right before serving rather than baking it in the oven.



Rosemary: For an interesting variation, add a small amount of chopped rosemary leaves to flavor your pizza dough, or make the dough into rosemary-flavored focaccia bread. [French rosemary](#) leaves also make an excellent addition to toppings of ground beef or lamb.



Other garden possibilities for pizza toppings include garlic, onions, [chives](#), [flat-leaf parsley](#) and [thyme](#). [Italian eggplants](#) and [zucchini](#) can be added to sauce recipes. Precook them before topping, since they need more baking time than the pizza crust. This year, I might also try growing [leeks](#) for a pizza variation of a Middle Eastern savory pie recipe.

Getting children involved:

It's sometimes challenging to find safe and non-destructive ways for young children to help in the garden, but advance planning helps. I like to get the heavy, less child-friendly work of forking and tilling the soil done without my daughter around. To keep children focused on a particular task, it is helpful to discuss what you'd like them to do before going outside. Bring whatever you'll need such as tools, water and a snack, so you don't have to make trips back inside.

Young children can help mix soil for seedlings, scoop it into flats, water with a fine spray hose, space seeds in furrows, make holes for transplants, and press soil around them. If they are old enough to handle children's scissors safely, they enjoy snipping off tips of herbs such as rosemary and oregano into a harvest basket. They'll quickly learn which color tomatoes are ripe for picking, and enjoy searching for zucchini hidden under masses of leaves. Many children also enjoy inspecting for pest infestations, spraying aphids with a mild soap and water solution, or collecting slugs.

Encourage them to enjoy the sensory experience of things in the garden. After we've accomplished something together (like sowing seeds) I sometimes set up my daughter with a flat of soil and some pots to make a "salad" out of weeds for earthworms or a teddy bear in a stroller. She plays with them while I get the rest of the work done! Children that have helped in the garden will share in the pride of the harvest.

For our pizza party, (since my daughter is too young to use a knife) I'll chop the toppings in advance and put each in separate bowls, so that the children can pass them to each other while decorating their pizzas. Another adult can supervise games until the pizzas finish baking, when everyone can sit down and enjoy the pizza feast!

Recommended Reading:

[Roots, Shoots, Buckets and Boots](#), by Sharon Lovejoy, contains a pizza garden plan and many more fun ideas for

gardening with children.

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