

Come in from the rain

For plants that need a little extra love, or for ones you need close to hand, a veranda is a shelter from the storm, says Lia Leendertz

Given the amount of rain we get, we are excessively bad at finding ways to be in the garden during a downpour. The Japanese build tea houses and little shelters from which to appreciate their damper moments, but we peer through windows at the garden in a dejected manner when it rains, and venture out only when it's stopped.

This was one of the thoughts that led me to build a veranda: a deck with a polycarbonate roof to keep out the rain. My veranda is a funny halfway point, not quite house, not quite garden - and maybe it takes some of its magic from this twilight status. And it is magic. It is my favourite place to be. It has a privacy the rest of the garden lacks - being screened from neighbouring upstairs windows - and there's nothing quite like sitting out there with a cup of tea as soft, warm summer rain falls.

Here is where I grow plants that need a little extra love and can't cope with the neglect dished out to those at the far (all of 15m away) end of the garden. In sight is in mind. Here I remember to nurture my pretty splashes of colour, such as pelargoniums and tender salvias, with comfrey feed to push them on to greater glories, and they're treated to the luxury of non-sporadic watering. It's also the place for those crops I want near at hand for my own sake, rather than theirs. All the herbs live here, so I don't ever have to put on my wellies to fetch a bunch of parsley or a small handful of basil. Even in winter I can call on the hardy herbs

sage and rosemary without trudging through wind and rain, as each lives in a pot of gravelly, well-drained soil up here out of the cold.

As it's a small space, I use the veranda for high-flavour, low-bulk crops, such as baby leaf salads and micro leaf of herbs such as fennel, rocket and coriander. You certainly don't need a covered area to do this - a good plan for any small garden. Picked when tiny and full of flavour, micros can be ready within a few days of sowing, and therefore are ideal for a spot that is naturally closely monitored by people taking procrastinating work breaks with cups of tea. I sow them into whatever attractive and shallow containers I have to hand, since they don't need a great deal of soil. A wooden crate from my veg box delivery occasionally gets requisitioned for this purpose. Sow thickly across the surface, water in and harvest when the shoots are about an inch tall to sprinkle on to salads moments before eating.

Certain vegetables lend themselves to container growing more than others, and over the years I have focused on those that produce again and again from the same plant - chillies, tomatoes, courgettes and cucumbers are particular favourites.

All this applies to gardening in any small patch, but there are some crops that fare particularly well under a cover. It suits my fan-trained peach - splayed out across a warm west-facing wall - and my dwarf nectarines in pots particularly well. Both fruits suffer from the debilitating rain-borne fungus peach



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leaf curl early in the year if the young leaves are exposed to rain. The fungus contorts and colours the leaves, rendering them unable to provide the energy that the plant needs. Keep the worst of the rain off and they miss this moment of jeopardy and thrive.

Tomatoes have similar rain issues, hit by the fruit-blackening tomato blight late in the season as they are starting to ripen. Keep them out of the rain and you may avoid the evil spores. The grape vine that climbs along the rafters of the veranda roof does spectacularly well here. If vines get wet as they are flowering the flowers can develop a cap that makes pollination impossible, and leads to terrible fruit set. Although mine flowers early in spring because of the extra warmth, the flowers will not be wet at this critical time.

There are a few drawbacks to building a veranda and to gardening under one. Though some local planning departments consider such structures "permitted development", in other areas you will need permission, so find out before you start building. The other worry is watering and rain runoff: by covering a chunk of garden you remove an area of ground where rain would naturally drain slowly away, increasing the likelihood of flooding, plus you create an area of planting that receives no natural rain at all. My solution has been to capture as much of the veranda-roof's rain as possible in big water butts, and therefore use that same rain that would naturally have fallen here to water my cosseted veranda dwellers.

It's been worth these little extra hassles for me. I have a beautiful place to grow things I couldn't otherwise, to keep herbs and other crops in perfect condition and near at hand, or even just to stand and whoop during a thunderstorm.