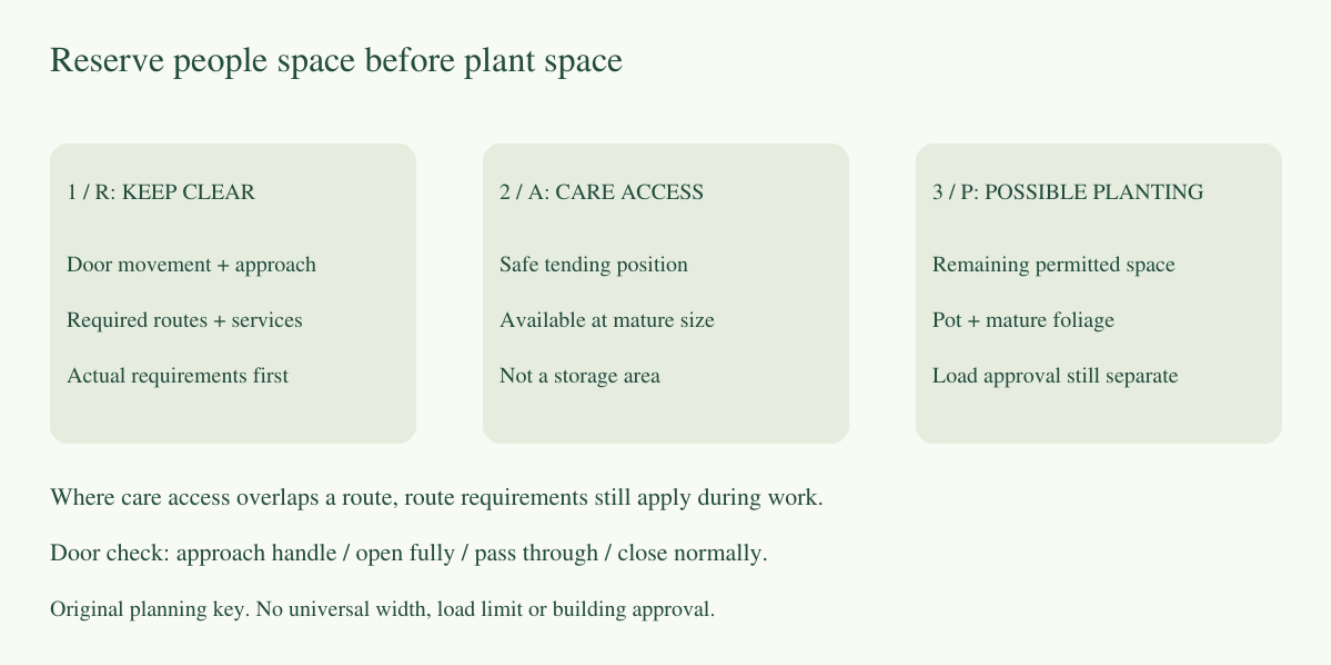
Keep Plantings Clear of Doors and Railings

Steadleaf Press



A practical growing guide with observation tools and original planning examples.

Plan the space people need before placing the plants. Doors and routes must remain clear, and railings must remain protective boundaries. This applies to the mature plant, its pot and saucer, and the equipment used to care for it.

The planning overlay below helps you separate the area that must stay open from the area available for a container garden. It does not establish building-code compliance or safe structural loading.

Establish the limits before drawing pots

For a balcony, shared terrace, communal entrance or rented property, ask the building manager or other responsible person which planting areas are permitted. Find out whether any part of the space serves as an escape route or emergency access point. Obtain the applicable requirements for doors, access, drainage, container placement and loads before choosing filled containers.

London Fire Brigade advises residents of purpose-built flats to obtain their building's specific fire safety arrangements from the housing provider or managing agent. It also warns against clutter in communal corridors and staircases, and against propping fire doors open. London Fire Brigade, Home fire safety guide

Confirm the balcony’s function before planning. If a site is designated to remain clear, leave it clear rather than trying to find a smaller pot that might be tolerated.

Record the answer in this short brief:

- Person or authority consulted:

- Date and relevant document:

- Planting permitted in:

- Areas that must stay clear:

- Applicable clearances or other conditions:

- Loading or placement questions still unresolved:

If the load question is unresolved, do not use a general online figure or the appearance of the balcony as approval. Get advice appropriate to the structure from the responsible building professional.

Draw the fixed features

Make a simple top-view plan on paper. Measure only from positions you can reach safely. Do not lean over a railing or stand on furniture to obtain a dimension.

Draw the outer boundary, walls and fixed fittings first. Add each door, its threshold and the area it moves through. For a hinged door, mark the hinge point and the full swept area, not just the door's position when closed or fully open. Include projecting handles and the space needed to use them. Draw a screen door or second door separately, then keep the combined movement and approach areas clear. For a sliding door, show the usable opening, track and approach area.

Mark anything that must remain visible or accessible: drains, inspection points, emergency equipment, vents and service access. Identify unfamiliar fittings before arranging plants around them.

Add railings and handrails as boundaries, with any locally required separation or access marked on the plan. Keep the railing outside the planting scheme: no containers hung on the outside, no pots balanced on top, and no plant or trellis tied to it for support.

Make the safe clearance and access overlay

Use tracing paper over the plan, or make a second copy. Use colours or labels.

R means keep clear. Shade the required route, door movement and approach areas. Include the space a person needs to operate the handle, open the door and move through without stepping around a pot. Add confirmed clearance around services and equipment.

A means access for care. Mark the places from which you will water, inspect and maintain each container while standing or sitting safely. This area must remain available when the plants have grown. It cannot depend on leaning over a guard or moving a heavy pot every time.

P means possible planting. Mark only the remaining permitted area. A P area is a candidate location, not confirmation that it can take any weight or any size of plant.

Use this simple overlay legend beside your own sketch:

- Door and threshold: R.

- Full door movement and approach: R.

- Required passage to the next safe destination: R.

- Drains and service access: R, according to applicable guidance.

- Safe position for tending a proposed pot: A.

- Remaining permitted footprint for pot and mature foliage: P.

Draw R first, A second and P last. Keep plant choices within those limits. An A mark shows where a person can tend a plant; it is not a storage spot for a stool, bucket or bag of mix. If care access overlaps a required route, the route's requirements still apply during the task. Choose another tending position or a simpler layout if gardening would obstruct access. Do not relabel part of R as P just because a pot can be moved later.

Add the plants at mature size

Draw the actual base and widest rim of each proposed container. Include its saucer or any approved supporting component. Around that footprint, draw a second outline for the plant's expected spread.

A pot may sit outside the route while its leaves, woody branches or trailing stems project into it. Look at the space at foot level, hand level and face level. Thorny or stiff growth deserves particular care near a place where people pass, reach for a handle or turn.

For a trailer, mark the permitted direction of growth. If that direction crosses the route, a door track, drainage access or the balcony edge, change the plant or position. Do not rely on remembering to trim it every few days.

Keep climbable objects away from balcony guards, especially where children may be present. Queensland Government guidance specifically warns against objects near balustrades that children could use to climb. Treat a large pot or plant stand as an object to assess, not automatically as decoration. Queensland Government, Keeping decks and balconies safe

Planting cannot correct a damaged or unsuitable guard. If you notice damage, movement or another concern, keep away from the affected area and report it to the responsible person. Do not test the railing, disguise it with foliage or attempt a repair as part of the garden project.

Work through a doorway example

Imagine a private ground-level patio reached through an outward-opening door. A gardener proposes three pots beside the wall. One is broad, one is upright, and one has trailing stems. This is an illustrative layout exercise, not a compliance assessment.

The pot bases clear the closed door. When the gardener adds the door's movement area, the broad pot overlaps it. When the mature foliage is added, the upright plant also projects into the approach to the handle.

The gardener moves the broad pot to a permitted planting area farther along the wall. They replace the upright candidate with a smaller-growing plant rather than narrowing the route. The trailing pot remains only if its growth can stay entirely within the planting area.

Next, they draw care access. The farthest pot cannot be watered without reaching over the broad one. They separate the two positions until both can be tended comfortably. If that makes the arrangement too large, they use two pots.

The revised plan leaves a clear approach. Check the whole movement sequence: approach the handle, open the door fully, pass through, then close it normally. A pot must not need to be moved to complete any of those steps. If a screen door is present, repeat the check with both doors in use. No particular width is supplied by this example. The real plan must meet the applicable requirements and the needs of the people using it, including anyone using a wheelchair, walker or other mobility aid.

Include watering and tidying in the plan

Clearance is not only about the permanent display. Watering cans, bags of potting mix and tools can occupy a route while you work. Decide where those items will sit and where they will be put away.

The Health and Safety Executive identifies obstructions as a common cause of trips and water or other contamination as a slip hazard. Its guidance is written for workplaces; the practical hazard checks are also useful when reviewing a garden route. HSE, Causes and prevention and Contamination

Watch where water goes during ordinary watering. Keep it off routes and away from neighbours' spaces, using a suitable arrangement that does not block the container's drainage or the building's outlets. Clean up spilled mix and fallen leaves promptly. If water repeatedly pools or runs where it should not, stop using that arrangement and seek the appropriate maintenance advice.

Local balcony policies may also restrict container materials and stored items. For example, Croydon Council's policy permits living plants only where they do not create a falling hazard and requires pots made of limited-combustibility materials. That is a policy for the properties it covers, not a rule to assume everywhere. Croydon Council, Balcony fire safety

Use the final check sheet

Review the layout when first arranged, after substantial growth, after adding anything new, and after weather has disturbed it.

- Doors open and close normally without contact with pots or plants.
- Thresholds, tracks and the required approach remain clear.
- Required routes remain usable by the people who need them.
- Mature foliage stays within the planned planting area.
- Railings and handrails remain unobstructed and are not plant supports.
- No container hangs outside or balances on the balcony edge.
- Pots and stands do not create climbing access to a guard.
- Drains, vents and relevant equipment remain accessible.
- Every pot can be cared for without stretching over an edge.
- Water, fallen material and temporary equipment do not create route hazards.
- Placement follows the confirmed building requirements.

Write one action beside any unchecked item. Resolve route or door obstruction promptly. If the answer depends on structural condition, load capacity or building requirements, pause that part of the garden plan until the responsible person has clarified it. Leave the space usable.

Sources and scope

- London Fire Brigade, Home fire safety guide: building-specific fire arrangements and clear communal areas.

- Queensland Government, Keeping decks and balconies safe: guard-related climbing and general balcony hazards.

- HSE, Causes and prevention and Contamination: trip and slip hazards.

- Croydon Council, Balcony fire safety: an example of a local balcony policy.

Sources initially checked 4 November 2026. Queensland's balcony-safety page, HSE's causes-and-prevention overview and Croydon's balcony policy were rechecked on 8 November 2026. The overlay, doorway sequence and checklist are original planning aids. This guide supplies no universal clearance width, load limit, structural repair or installation method. Follow the requirements that apply to your building and location.