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Kubernetes Distributions: 26-Option Decision Guide

Cloud-managed, enterprise, lightweight and on-premises distributions, with a pick for each situation.

Updated **2026-10-29** · Full guide: www.mrplanb.com/comparisons/kubernetes-distributions-report

> The report groups the major Kubernetes distributions into cloud-managed services, enterprise platforms, lightweight options and on-premises or specialty builds. The best distribution is the one that fits your context, so start with your constraints: infrastructure, team skills, support needs, budget and lock-in tolerance.

26 distributions across 4 categories

8 cloud-managed services

5 enterprise platforms

5 lightweight distributions

Pick by situation

Situation	Start with
Learning, local dev	Minikube or Kind; DigitalOcean or Civo for cloud experiments
Production cloud	EKS, GKE or AKS by existing cloud commitment; GKE Autopilot for least ops
Enterprise platform	OpenShift (full platform), Rancher (multi-cluster), Tanzu (VMware shops)
Edge, constrained	K3s, MicroK8s (Ubuntu), KubeEdge (IoT)
Security first	Talos, RKE2 or OpenShift
DIY, full control	Vanilla Kubernetes (kubeadm) or Kubespray

Cloud-managed services

Eight providers handle control plane, upgrades and infrastructure integration.

Amazon EKS
Deep AWS integration. Watch AWS lock-in, cost and complex networking.

Google GKE
Native K8s experience and Autopilot mode. Some GCP-specific features.

Azure AKS
Azure AD, Arc hybrid options, Windows containers, free control plane.

DigitalOcean / Linode
Simple, affordable, good for startups and cost-conscious teams. Fewer enterprise features.

Civo
K3s-based clusters in under 2 minutes. Best for dev and test; newer provider.

IBM and Oracle
IBM suits IBM enterprises with an OpenShift option; Oracle suits Oracle database workloads.

Enterprise platforms

Platform	Strength	Watch out for
Red Hat OpenShift	Comprehensive platform, built-in CI/CD, strong security	Complex setup, higher costs
SUSE Rancher	Manages any K8s, great UI, multi-cluster	Extra layer, resource overhead
VMware Tanzu	vSphere integration, enterprise features	VMware dependency, licensing costs
Mirantis Kubernetes Engine	Bare metal, Windows containers	Smaller community
Platform9	Managed control plane, works anywhere	Subscription costs

Lightweight and on-premises picks

- K3s: small binary (<100MB), low resource usage, edge-ready, production-grade.
- MicroK8s: single-command install, snap-based, Ubuntu-focused.
- K0s: single binary with no dependencies; Kind, Minikube and K3d are for local dev and CI only.
- Talos Linux: immutable, API-driven, minimal attack surface; different paradigm.
- Harvester: hyperconverged VMs plus containers on K3s, aimed at replacing VMware.
- Kubespray: Ansible-based, production-grade, needs Ansible knowledge.

Selection factors to check

- [ ] Cloud, on-premises or hybrid; existing VMware or bare metal.
- [ ] Multi-cloud and edge or IoT needs.
- [ ] Managed or self-managed; team expertise.
- [ ] Support requirements and day-2 operations complexity.
- [ ] Budget and TCO.
- [ ] Compliance requirements and vendor lock-in tolerance.
- [ ] Time to production.

Sources and notes: Kubernetes Distributions Report, Mr.PlanB comparisons · CNCF certification status as listed on the report