

Container Gardening

There are few plants that cannot be grown in a suitable size container. This includes trees and shrubs, climbers, perennials, ferns, bulbs, annuals, and vegetables. Containers may include planter boxes, wooden barrels, hanging baskets, and large flowerpots.

Choosing Containers

- Avoid containers with narrow openings, or openings that are smaller than the largest diameter of the container. It will be difficult to get plants out of such containers without damaging the plant or breaking the container when you need to repot them.
- Small containers restrict the root area, and dry out very quickly. Select the size of container according to the size and number of plants to be grown
- Make sure your container has adequate drainage. You can line the bottom of the container with newspaper to prevent soil from leaking out of the drainage holes. Set the container up on bricks or blocks to allow free drainage. If the container has a saucer under it, do not allow water to sit in the saucer after water has drained through the container—that can promote overwatering and root rot.
- Remember that dark-colored containers will absorb more heat than light-colored containers.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Types of Container Material

- Plastic pots may deteriorate in the sunlight.
- Clay pots are porous and can dry out rapidly. They must be monitored closely for loss of moisture.
- Wood can be sized and shaped to fit a specific site, but wooden containers are susceptible to rot. (Redwood and cedar are relatively rot resistant.) Avoid wood treated with creosote or other toxic compounds.
- Glazed ceramic pots are excellent choices, but may require several drainage holes. They can also be heavy.

Displaying Containers: Containers usually look better in groups, with containers of different heights.

Potting Soil for Containers

A fairly lightweight mix is needed for container gardening. Soil straight from the garden usually cannot be used in a container because it is too heavy. It may also contain bacteria or other harmful organisms. The planting medium must drain rapidly but retain enough moisture to keep the roots moist. A commercial potting mixture such as a “soilless” mix works well. Thoroughly moisten the potting soil before filling your container.

Leave about 2” between the top of the soil and the top of the container. You can add ½ an inch of mulch later.

Designing a Container

To show off all the plants in your container, select plants of different heights. Consider plants for spread, and plants to grow down over the edge of the container. Select flowers with blossom colors that compliment each other and don't hesitate to use plants that have striking foliage and no flowers.

Plant too much rather than too little to achieve a lush, full effect. (But to compensate for extra plants, fertilize and water properly.)

Sunlight

The amount of sunlight needed by flowers varies depending on the varieties grown. If you are growing vegetables, your containers will need at least five or six hours of direct sunlight each day. Leafy vegetables such as cabbage and lettuce can tolerate the most shade, while root crops such as beets and carrots will need more sun. Fruiting vegetables such as tomatoes and cucumbers need the most sun.

Fertilizer

Since potting mix drains fairly rapidly, fertilizer can be washed out of the soil when you water. You may need to fertilize more frequently than you would if plants were in the ground. You can use a diluted liquid fertilizer every other watering. Use a complete, balanced solution that includes trace elements.

Watering

Container plants need to be watered more often than those planted in your garden since they can lose moisture quickly, especially if they are in an exposed location. Some plants will need to be watered daily—or even twice a day—during hot, dry weather. Check the container daily by feeling the soil. A mulch can help to conserve moisture, and grouping the pots reduces evaporation and creates more of a foliage canopy to help shade the soil and keep it cool.

Clay pots and other porous containers will need more frequent watering than other containers, since they allow additional evaporation from the sides of the pots. Small pots also tend to dry out more quickly than larger ones. The larger the container, the greater the amount of water that will be needed. A large container—for example, 18 inches in diameter or larger—will need at least a gallon of water per session.

Some research suggests that the best time to water container plants is between 3:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. When container plants are watered early in the day, they can experience water stress by midday.

Sample References on Container Gardening

- Donaldson, Stephanie, *The Ultimate Container Gardener*
- Guerra, Michael, *The Edible Container Garden: Growing Fresh Food in Small Spaces*
- Joyce, David, *The Complete Container Garden*
- McGee, Rose Marie Nichols & Stuckey, Maggie, *The Bountiful Container: Create Container Gardens of Vegetables, Herbs, Fruits and Edible Flowers*
- Phillips, Sue, *The Container Gardening Encyclopedia*

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