

Container Gardening

Container gardens may be the answer for persons with limited garden space. Residents of apartments, condominiums, retirement homes, or houses on small lots can still enjoy gardening using containers. Containers are mobile, allowing a gardener to take the plants along or move them for an instant splash of color.

Senior gardeners can plant and tend to reach comfortably raised containers, when standard gardening may be too strenuous or too low. What better way is there for children to have their very own first garden? You can enjoy your plants more fully by locating them on patios, on balconies, or in window boxes.

Container gardening is not without its problems. A plant growing in an exposed location will be under more stress, will dry out faster, and will need a regular watering schedule. Consistent rains tend to leach the nutrients from the containers, requiring a regular fertilizing schedule. Large containers can be expensive and difficult to move when filled with potting mix, but the advantages far outweigh the problems, so let's get started growing container style.



Soil Mixes

Soil is not always best for container gardening. When ordinary soil is saturated with water, the air spaces are filled, removing essential air from the roots. This is why a soil substitute, often called potting mix, is recommended. The mix may contain some soil (called soil mix) or no soil at all (a soilless mix). Additional ingredients such as peat moss, vermiculite, and perlite allow rapid drainage but still hold sufficient water for plant growth.

Purchase potting mix from nurseries or garden stores under a variety of trade names: Jiffy Mix, Pro Mix, Metro Mix, Pro Soil and others. If you have only a few containers, you may want to take them to a local greenhouse and have them filled with their greenhouse potting mix (for a fee).

Consult references in your local library or Extension office for additional information on container gardening, including recipes for mixing large quantities of potting soil from a variety of ingredients.

Containers

Containers come in a variety of styles and sizes. Of course old buckets, cans, and similar containers can all be recycled. The essential thing is that the container have holes in the bottom for draining excess water.



Plastic: Plastic containers are available in a variety of sizes, shapes, and styles and a variety of fashion colors. Plastic containers are light in weight, which is both an advantage and a disadvantage. Being light, they cut down weight to be carried. On the other hand, when a plant dries out, the plastic container may not be heavy enough to keep the plant upright.

Clay: This old favorite is preferred by many gardeners for the earth tone color it provides.

Clay is porous and moisture will be lost more readily from the sides and bottom. Also, clay pots are breakable and heavier.

Wood: Wood is a popular material for containers. Redwood or cedar is relatively rot resistant and can be used without staining or painting. Exterior grade plywood and other types of wood can also be used. Avoid using wood treated with creosote, penta, or other phenolic compounds, since vapors can injure some plants. Always use copper-treated lumber if preservative-treated lumber is needed. Wooden containers are excellent for portability and can be purchased or built in a variety of sizes, shapes, and styles. Several container garden references offer plans for building attractive containers.

"How big should the container be?" This question can best be answered by considering the type of plants you plan to grow. There is a balance between the top growth and root systems of plants. Small plants can be grown in fairly small, shallow containers while larger plants need a larger container. Plants in "stressful" locations such as a hot patio exposed to the south, or in elevated locations may need a slightly larger container than ones less exposed.

Most annual flowers and small vegetables will grow in containers from 5-inch pots to gallon or larger sized containers. Larger vegetables, such as dwarf tomatoes, peppers or cucumbers, will require 1-gallon to 3-gallon containers. Full-size tomatoes and roses will require at least a 3-gallon container.

Fertilizer

Since potting mixes drain water rapidly, fertilizer will be washed out of the containers as you water, and you will need to replace lost fertilizer. Lighter mixes will require more frequent fertilizing than heavier mixes containing soil. Remember, you are growing a plant with a small, constricted root system, so regular fertilizing and watering are important.



Many gardeners prefer to apply a diluted, water-soluble fertilizer solution at every other watering. There are several water-soluble fertilizer materials available at your garden supply dealer, including Rapid Grow, Hyponex, Miracle Grow, and other products. If you fertilize at every other watering, use only one-fourth the recommended rate unless the instructions state directions for continuous feeding for container gardening.

Controlled release or time release fertilizers are also becoming widely available. These are pellets designed to release fertilizer gradually over a long period of time. Use these according to directions on the package label.

Watering

Since containers are usually situated in an exposed location, water is quickly lost from them. Also, smaller containers have less of a reservoir for holding water until needed. There is no rule of thumb on how often to water since it will vary with the type of plant, potting mix, weather conditions, and type of pot used.

You may find that daily watering is needed during hot periods. One advantage of using a potting mix is that it is nearly impossible to overwater because the water quickly drains from the container. Check your plants regularly and look for signs of wilting to indicate a need for water. Another method is to stick your finger into the upper inch or so of the potting mix to feel the dryness. Always apply sufficient water to allow a small amount to come from the bottom drain hole. This indicates the container is thoroughly saturated.

Potting mixes can be easily washed from a container, so never use a direct stream of water from a hose. Always use a "breaker" nozzle to break up the stream of water or a sprinkling can. A sprinkling can is handy for applying fertilizer as you water.

Since containers must be watered regularly, you will need to arrange for plant care when you vacation. Grouping plants together will reduce their water use. Some ingenious gardeners have developed a "trickle" device by punching a small hole in a large container that serves as a water reservoir. The water can then be channeled to one or more containers. The most reliable method of plant watering while you are away however, is to arrange for someone to care for your plants. They can water plants as well as check for problems that may develop.

Culture and Care

Plants need care and attention throughout the season. Insects and disease can be a problem because plants are growing under more stress and with limited root systems. Control measures will be similar to those used in conventional gardening. Refer to North Carolina Cooperative Extension publications for ways of dealing with garden

pest problems.

What to Grow

Flowers: Many annual flowers can be grown in containers, especially those that tolerate heat stress. Especially popular are the many types of marigolds, geraniums, and periwinkle (vinca). Impatiens will produce flowers in shady locations, as will ageratum, begonias, and nicotiana.



"Cages" can be used with containers to support such crops as tomatoes, cucumbers and pole beans.

Vegetables: In recent years, there has been an emphasis on developing varieties suitable for container gardens. Vegetables require sunny locations and will vary in their productivity depending on the type of crop. Check seed catalogs for new varieties developed for this purpose. There are also several types of "ornamental" vegetables adapted for growing in containers. Flowering cabbage and flowering kale are attractive relatives of the standard varieties. Lettuce is available in a variety of colors and leaf textures. Red chard is another popular container plant because of its bright red stalks.

Herbs: Many gardeners like to have herbs growing near the kitchen where they are handy to use in cooking. Basil, chives, marjoram, and thyme are all easy to grow in containers. Many gardeners keep mint in containers since it is an aggressive plant that spreads over the garden. Some herbs are perennial and can be moved indoors for winter use or held in the container until next year. Many gardeners dig a hole in the garden to store pots of perennial herbs until the next season.

