

Container Gardening

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Container gardening is an attractive and interesting way to make plants part of a busy lifestyle and solve landscaping problems.

- Container plants are portable. They can be moved to a spot where color is needed, whether sun or shade.
- A patio or balcony can be transformed into a vegetable or flower garden or both.
- Hanging baskets and window boxes expand gardens vertically.
- Containers provide an alternative to competing tree and shrub roots.
- Container gardening is an alternative for those who are not physically able to do traditional gardening.
- Containers can be used to avoid soil-borne diseases.

CONTAINER GARDENING METHODS

Container - You can use almost any container you like as long as it is deep enough to accommodate the root system of the plants you are using. In general, larger containers are better, especially for vegetables (15+ inches deep). Wood, plastic, pulp, clay, metal (can get very hot), burlap, wire and moss containers are all suitable. For decorative or unusual containers, consider using milk cans, old boots, wheelbarrows, bathtubs, coffee pots, pails, and so on.

The containers need to drain so the soil will not hold too much water. If your chosen container does not have drain holes, drill them yourself. If that isn't possible, you can plant in a smaller container that drains into a larger one without a drain hole.

Check the underside of plastic containers to determine if they are safe for growing edibles. Numbers 1, 2, 4, and 5 are a good choice for planting edibles, they will not leach harmful chemicals. Others are not

Soil - Always use potting soil in your containers. Do not use soil from your yard or garden. Choose a bagged soil that contains organic material like peat moss, and drainage like vermiculite. These amendments allow potting soil to retain moisture, maintain air spaces and allow roots to grow quickly and easily.

Water - Containers require more frequent watering than plants grown in the ground. Containers dry out quickly because their surfaces are exposed to air and winds. This is especially true for hanging containers. Plan on watering at least once a day, and possibly twice a day on hot summer days.

Fertilizer - Plants obtain nutrients from the soil and water around their roots. When those nutrients are used up, the roots grow out further in search of food. In containers, space and nutrients are limited, and need to be replaced during the growing season. You can use liquid, dry, or timed-release fertilizers.

- Liquids: Liquid fertilizers are immediate, easy to mix and apply, and can be diluted to various concentrations to suit different plant needs. You can use them once a month at full strength, or every two weeks at half strength.
- Dry Fertilizer: There are many to choose from. Read and follow the label. Water soil thoroughly both before and after applying dry fertilizers.
- Timed-Release: Nutrients are released from the fertilizer a little at a time. Timed-release fertilizers stay active for various lengths of time. Check product label.

In general, use balanced or complete fertilizers such as 5-10-10 or 10-10-10. The numbers stand for (N) Nitrogen, (P) Phosphorous and (K) Potassium. High nitrogen fertilizers such as 16-10-4 or 21-0-0 are used for lush foliage growth. High phosphorous fertilizers such as 15-30-15 help flowering and fruiting plants. Organic fertilizers are suggested for edibles.

Suggestions for planting containers

- You can plant all the same plants in one container, such as all petunias or all zinnias. If you plant different varieties, make sure they all have the same cultural needs. Do they all like sun? Are they all heavy feeders?
- Choose plants of different heights. Put the tallest in the center of freestanding containers, or at the back of window boxes for contrast.
- Put plants close together to produce a full, lush look. Also stagger plants rather than planting in rows for a more natural look.
- Leave soil level about an inch below the rim of the container so water has ample room to soak in.
- After planting the container, water thoroughly. Then, move the container to a shady area for a day or two to lessen transplant shock.

Compiled by Tonie Fitzgerald, Master Gardener, Washington State University Master Gardeners Program (C020)

Plants for sunny locations: Nasturtium, marigold, geranium, alyssum, lobelia, ivy, vinca, zinnia, aster, pansy, ageratum, petunia, verbena, dusty miller.

Plants for shady locations: Impatiens, begonias, lobelia, alyssum, ivy, vinca, pansy, coleus, fuchsia, browallia, dusty miller.

Vegetables: Cherry tomatoes, lettuce, bush varieties of squash, carrots, onions, beets, peppers.

Herbs: Most herbs grow well in containers, with the exception of the very tall or large ones such as dill.