



CONTAINER GARDENING



Tips for the Home Gardener

Containers can brighten a dull spot on a patio or in a corner, and are great for areas with limited space. Use container plantings to enhance your garden with an interesting focal point, adding height and depth to flat areas. Perennials, annuals, vegetables, herbs, and even aquatic plants can be attractively arranged in containers of all shapes and sizes.

Container Selection

Containers are available in a great range of materials including clay, plastic, concrete, glazed ceramic, wood, fiberglass, and terra cotta. If using a terra cotta pot, it is important to soak the container before planting to keep it from drying out. Containers recycled from antique stores and flea markets, such as old bottles, wash pans, bathtubs, bed frames, and wagons can also make fabulous planters in the hands of a creative gardener.

Regardless of material or shape, any container used for gardening needs holes for drainage. If drilling holes is not an option (as with ceramic planters), confine your planting to a plastic pot with drainage holes that fits inside your container of choice.

When planning a container garden, consider the size of your space as well as the permanence of the container arrangement. The larger the container, the more soil and plants it can hold, but the heavier and more difficult it will be to move. Aesthetically, containers should complement their surroundings but not draw attention away from the plants they harbor.

Potting Media

Using the proper growing medium will promote the continued health and attractiveness of your container-grown plants. Potting mixtures are available in two different types, soil-less and soil-based. A soil-less mixture is usually peat-based with varying amounts of pine bark, perlite, and vermiculite. These light mixes are great for annuals or other plants that do not require much weight to hold them down. Because they promote good drainage, they are also ideal for shady locations. Soil-less mixes should be kept moist, but over-watering can cause disease and fungal problems.

Soil-based mixtures are ideal for small trees, shrubs, or larger plants that need to be anchored down by a heavier mix. Because water percolates more slowly through soil-based mixes, they tend to hold fertilizer longer. To improve drainage, you may want to add a layer of gravel on the bottom of the container.

Planting and Growing Tips

- ☞ Plant selection - Annuals, perennials, bulbs, vines, vegetables, and woody plants may be combined to create a display with year-round interest. Plants sharing the same container must have similar sunlight, moisture, and soil requirements.
- ☞ Plant placement - When planting most containers, use taller plants in the center of the pot and smaller and cascading ones toward the edge of the container. In window boxes, taller plants should be placed towards the back of the container.

- ☞ Watering – Water your container plantings when the top two inches of the potting mix has dried out. During hot, dry periods, you may need to water once a day. Water thoroughly until excess water runs through the drainage holes. The more plants per container, the faster they will dry out.
- ☞ Fertilizer – Fertilize your container-grown plants with time-release pellets or use a small amount of soluble fertilizer. Every other week, your containers can be watered with a light water-soluble fertilizer (nutrient ratio 1-2-1). In the summer and when first planting, mix a granular slow-release fertilizer into the potting mix. In the spring and fall, you can apply a supplementary granular fertilizer (nutrient ratio 1-2-1) to the surface of the potting mix.
- ☞ Maintenance – Plants in containers need the same care as those in your garden. Pinching and deadheading should be done as needed to maintain the health and aesthetics of your container-grown plants. Remove old, faded flowers and pinch back stems to encourage continuous flowering. Keep containers weeded and control insects and diseases as needed. A layer of mulch can be added to help suppress weeds and keep the soil cool and moist.

Over-wintering Container Plants

Container plants are more susceptible to cold than those in flower beds. Any herbaceous and woody perennials that you keep outside year-round must be hardy to at least three zones colder than the USDA cold hardiness zone in which you live. For example, if you live in Zone 7, the plant must be hardy to Zone 4. (See www.usna.usda.gov/Hardzone for a zone map.)

Containers that are kept outside in winter must be made from materials that can withstand repeated freezing and thawing. Avoid clay containers, as they tend to hold too much moisture and crack from freezing.

Non-hardy plants or containers prone to freeze damage should be over-wintered in an insulated garage or cool basement.

Longwood's Container Display

Visit Longwood's Idea Garden to get ideas for enhancing your home garden with attractive container plantings. The Container Display offers an inspiring array of containers, artfully arranged around a simple brick patio. Annuals, perennials, and mixed plantings overflow from containers of all shapes and sizes that complement a wide range of gardening styles.