

# Container Planting

## Overview

Containers can provide effective color accent, year-round structure, and fragrance in specific areas of a garden. They are ideal for frost-sensitive plants or plants that require special conditions (e.g., rock garden, water garden).

Containers can lift plants to heights where they are appreciated up close. For gardeners with limited space, containers offer additional room to plant. And for gardeners with too many plants or for those who can't decide where to place a new acquisition, containers provide good temporary homes.

## Types of Containers

You can choose from many types of containers, of which these are the most common:

- Clay pots – Inexpensive, but dry out quickly.
- Terracotta – Somewhat more costly than clay, but will typically last longer.
- Ceramic containers – A broad range of color and shape, but can be easily damaged.
- Plastic pots – Lightweight and inexpensive, but become brittle over time. You can prolong the life of a plastic pot by setting it in a decorative pot.
- Wood containers – Will ultimately rot; the most resistant woods are cedar and redwood.
- Tin containers – Rust over time.
- Whiskey barrels – A good size for shrubs and small trees, but are difficult to move.

Of course, you can make your own unique containers out of old wheelbarrows, old canners, even old shoes or boots. You are limited only by your imagination.

Whatever you choose to use as a container, always make certain it has adequate drainage holes.

Container sizes are stated according to the top diameter. As a guideline, 12-inch containers work well for flowering annuals and perennials. Larger pots are a good choice for shrubs, small trees, and combination plantings. And a half barrel can contain a small-scale garden which will provide a few flowers, herbs, and/or vegetables.

## Soil for Containers

Containers require special potting or planting soil so that they drain well. A good potting mix should be light and fluffy. A slow-release fertilizer may be added to the potting mix before you plant. Although some people suggest adding water-retention crystals, research-based support for that notion is lacking.

Never use garden soil in containers because soil tends to be too fine-textured and doesn't allow for a sufficient air supply to the roots, thereby limiting adequate drainage and inhibiting root growth. Garden soil may also bring in disease, insects, and weed seeds.

And don't follow the ill-advised practice of adding coarse stuff in the bottom of the container for drainage. Unfortunately, because of the dynamics of water movement, that coarse material under the potting mix will inhibit drainage.

## Fertilizer

Fertilizer elements in container soil are flushed out of the pot each time you water. So be sure to add fertilizer when you plant a container. Mix a slow release fertilizer into the potting mix when planting. Then, during the growing season, apply a water-soluble fertilizer every 2 to 3 weeks, as needed, to maintain plants in optimum condition.

## Caring for Container Plants

In general the larger the container, the better your plants are likely to do.

Containers limit root space. So, to help plants thrive, you need to water and fertilize more often than if the same plants are planted in the ground. Containers may need to be watered once, or even twice, daily during warm weather.

Place the container in a location that is appropriate to the needs of the plants. Protect containers from direct sunlight to avoid "cooking" the root ball from the excessive heat.

During the growing season, plants in a container require careful and frequent grooming. Prune (trim) and deadhead (remove spent flowers) as needed to promote bushy growth and encourage more flowers. As plants in the container grow, don't be afraid to remove those that don't work and add replacements to keep the container looking good.

During the winter, containers may break during a cold spell because water in the potting mix expands when it freezes. Protect your plants' roots from winter's cold by wrapping the container with insulation materials. Alternately, store the pots in a frost-free place such as a shed or garage.

## Plant Selection

Almost anything that can be planted in the ground can be grown in a container. This includes

small trees, shrubs, roses, vines, annuals, and perennials, provided the size of container is suitable.

When putting together a container, consider plants that occupy different heights, possess different foliage textures, and colors of flowers and leaves.

Aesthetics is a matter of individual preference. Go for what pleases you.

In general, plant annuals in a mass to achieve strong visual effect, give vegetables room to spread

as they grow, and make certain trees and shrubs have adequate space for root growth.

Plan on repotting such long-term plants as trees and shrubs every 2 or 3 years. This can be accomplished in two ways. One is to cut away several inches of the rootball, then return it to the original container, filling the space with fresh potting mix. Or you can move the plant into a container several inches larger than the original, filling the space with fresh potting mix.

### Some plants commonly used in containers

#### Annuals

Alyssum  
Begonia  
Dianthus  
Dwarf Zinnia  
Fuchsia  
Impatiens  
Lobelia  
Marigold  
Nicotiana  
Pansies and Violas  
Petunia  
Salvia  
Verbena

#### Perennials

Asters  
Bulbs  
Chrysanthemum  
Coreopsis  
Dahlia  
Fern  
Geranium  
Herbs  
Heuchera (coral bells)  
Lamium  
Sedum  
Sweet William

#### Vegetables

Bush Cucumbers  
Chard  
Eggplant  
Endive  
Lettuce  
Peppers  
Spinach  
Tomatoes

#### Shrubs & Small Trees

Acuba  
Barberry  
Boxwood  
Conifers  
Fatsia  
Grecian Bay Tree  
Hebe  
Hydrangea  
Rose  
Skimmia

### Additional Information

Oregon State University doesn't currently have any publications about growing plants in containers. However, the OSU Master Gardeners at your county's Extension Service office are available to answer your questions. See phone numbers below.

The following OSU publications are available at your county's OSU Extension Service office.

Some publications are online at <http://eesc.orst.edu/>  
*Sustainable Gardening* (EM8742)

*Plant Materials for Landscaping: A list for the Pacific Northwest* (PNW 500)

So many books about growing in containers are available that it's difficult to limit our suggestions to just a few titles. You'll find numerous ideas for containers as well as plant combinations and uses by browsing through the volumes at bookstores and libraries.

*To obtain more gardening information, contact your local OSU Extension Office.*

*Or go to the OSU Extension's Gardening Encyclopedia at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/gardening>.*

*Clackamas County Master Gardeners 503-655-8631*

*Washington County Master Gardeners 503-725-2300*

Also look for OSU Master Gardeners at Farmer's Markets and County Fairs.