

Container Planting

Overview

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

Containers can lift plants to heights where they can be 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 their new acquisitions, 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: More costly than clay, but typically last longer and dry out more slowly.
- Ceramic containers: A broad range of color and shape, but can be easily damaged.
- Plastic pots: Lightweight and inexpensive, but become brittle with exposure to light. You can prolong the life of a plastic pot by setting it inside a decorative pot.
- Wood containers: Will ultimately rot; the most resistant woods are cedar and redwood.
- Tin containers: Rust over time.
- Whiskey barrel: A good size for shrubs and small trees, but difficult to move.

Another option is to 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 drainage holes.

Container sizes are stated according to the top diameter. As a guideline, a 12-inch container works well for flowering annuals and perennials. Anything smaller will dry out very quickly.

Larger pots are a good choice for shrubs, small trees, and combination plantings. A half barrel can contain a small-scale garden of ornamental and/or edible plants; you can feature various flowers bursting with color; herbs for cooking or making tea; vegetables for snacks or meals; or a combination thereof.

Soil for containers

Containers should be filled with potting mix or planter mix because these are designed to be coarse-textured in order to ensure good drainage. In other words, a good potting mix will be light and fluffy.

You can mix a slow-release fertilizer into 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. Its very fine-texture stops adequate drainage within the shallow confines of a pot. As a result, roots don't grow well because of insufficient air and your plants fail. Garden soil may also bring in disease, insects, and weed seeds.

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

Fertilizer

The fertilizer elements in a container are flushed out of the pot each time you water. So it's important to add fertilizer when you plant a container. Mix a 3- to 4-month slow-release fertilizer into the potting mix before you start. Then, to maintain plants in optimum condition during the growing season, apply a water-soluble fertilizer every 2 to 3 weeks, as needed.

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 were planted in the ground. You may find that you need to water your containers 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, be willing to remove those that don't work, then 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 of varying heights which possess different foliage

textures, and display blending or contrasting colors in the flowers and/or leaves.

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

In general, plant annuals in a mass to achieve a 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.

A few choice plants for your containers

Annuals

Alyssum
Begonia
Dianthus
Dwarf Zinnia
Fuchsia
Impatiens
Lobelia
Marigold
Nicotiana
Pansy and Viola
Petunia
Salvia
Verbena

Perennials

Aster
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://extension.oregonstate.edu/eesc/>

Sustainable Gardening (EM 8742)

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

So many books are available about growing in containers that it's difficult to limit our suggestions to just a few titles. You'll find many more by browsing the volumes at bookstores and libraries.

The Bountiful Container by Rose Marie Nichols McGee

Jim Wilson's Container Gardening: Soils, Plants, Care and Sites by Jim Wilson

Container Gardening (Sunset Books)

Container Gardening (DK Publishing, Inc.)

Quick and Easy Container Water Gardens by Philip Swindells

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.