

Container Gardening



Gardening in containers offers many advantages compared with gardening in the ground. Your garden becomes portable; if you find that your plants aren't doing well where they are, you can move them to a better location. You need never be bored—just change the arrangement of your containers and the plants within them year after year. Containers also give your garden height, which can make your planting more visible. And if you're gardening with small children or someone in a wheelchair, the elevated soil surface of containers makes it easier for them to get their hands in the soil.

A container garden allows you to grow edible plants if the ground soil is unsuitable. (Soil in urban areas may have been contaminated by heavy metals and other toxic compounds or compacted by construction.) You can also ensure that your soil is weed free by filling your planter with a sterile potting mixture.

Be creative and recycle household items into planters by making drainage holes in the bottom. Avoid using wooden containers painted with toxic substances, metal containers that will rust, and heat-absorbing dark-colored containers, which can dry out quickly and damage roots.

Maintenance requirements depend on the size of your container and the plants you choose to grow. Container gardens need to be watered more frequently than plants in the ground. Planters made of plastic or nonporous materials will help slow water loss. Also, choosing drought-tolerant plants will help your garden stay beautiful even when the soil is dry. Look for varieties of plants that are small enough to thrive in your container. Most seed companies offer dwarf or determinate varieties of plants that work well in restricted spaces.

Thinking About Design

Before you do any planting, spend some time designing your container garden. A good approach is to make some rough sketches (using color) of a few designs, and then use the drawing as your blueprint.

- **Location.** Make sure the location of the container is well suited to the amount of sun your plants need: For example, plants that like full sun need six hours or more a day. Also, consider the angles from which people will view the garden. If no one is going to look at the back of the planter, put the tallest plants in the back. However, if people will see the planter from all angles, consider putting the tallest plants in the middle, surrounded with smaller ones.
- **Color.** There are many ways to use color in container gardens. You can combine plants with similar hues, such as yellow, red, and orange. Or you may choose plants with contrasting colors, like purple and yellow, or contrast light with dark.
- **Asymmetry.** To create an interesting clump of a certain plant or color, install plants in groups of three or five; asymmetrical designs using odd, not even, numbers are more interesting to the eye.

- **Verticals.** Container gardens are ideal for plants that trail or cascade over the edges. This creates an interesting effect, especially in combination with taller plants that also draw the eye upward.
- **Texture.** When choosing container plants, think about the texture of the leaves and flowers. Are they lacy, ruffled, smooth, puckered, or fanlike? Using plants with different textures creates attractive visual contrast.
- **Size.** How big will your plants grow? Do some research to find out how big they'll be at maturity, not just what they look like now. Plan for the future and don't overcrowd them.

Planting the Container

Once you have a design, the next step is to plant your container. Afterward, it may be very heavy, so try to assemble your container garden in its permanent location.

1. Make sure your container has holes for drainage in the bottom. If you need to create holes, make them with a hammer and nail or with a drill. If you can only make small holes, make a lot of them.
2. To improve drainage, place an inch or so of gravel or shards from a broken clay flowerpot in the bottom and cover with a sheet or two of newspaper.
3. Mix your soil. In a separate container (without drainage holes), combine your potting soil and compost (unless your planter is large enough to mix it in directly). If squirrels are a problem, consider mixing in some dried bloodmeal, a fertilizer that repels rodents, available at garden shops. Add water and stir until the mixture is moist and evenly mixed.
4. Fill the planter about half to two-thirds full with soil. Arrange your plants (still in their pots) according to your design, and make any changes that seem necessary.
5. Remove the plants from their pots, gently loosen their roots, and dip them in a bucket of water to give them a drink. Now put them in place, adding soil to secure them.
6. Once the plants are secure, add soil to cover all the roots. Make sure the soil level is at least two to three inches below the top edge of your container in order to prevent overflow when watering.
7. Add a layer of mulch across the soil surface to conserve water and prevent weeds from growing. Wood-chip mulch is attractive and easy to find; pine mulch will increase the acidity of your soil, which is good for many plants.
8. Water your planter thoroughly. When water drains out the bottom, you know you've watered enough.

Maintenance

After planting, the most important thing to do is keep your garden moist. Check the soil every day by pressing a finger about an inch down into the soil. If the soil feels dry, add water until you see it drain out the bottom. The plants will also let you know when they need water by looking droopy or wilted. If you know that no one will be around to check your plants for a few days, water the container well even if it feels moist.

Cutting off dead flowers—deadheading—and pruning dead or damaged plant material will keep your container garden looking fresh. Until you master the art of pruning, be conservative. Before you cut, think about what the plant will look like afterward; the trick is to hide the fact that you've pruned anything.

Perennial plants will live for many years. Annual plants usually don't survive the winter, but some might survive a mild one. Come fall, let your plants tell you when they're ready to be trimmed down—they'll die back naturally. Don't remove plant roots; simply trim the leaves and stems down to a few inches above the soil and watch to see what comes back in the spring.

In late fall or early winter, spread extra mulch across the top of your container to help insulate perennial plant roots. Make your planters more attractive to people and discourage squirrels from digging in them through winter by covering them with pine needles or boughs of holly.

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