

# Contain Yourself: Creating a Unique Potted Garden



When it comes to gardening, we have an abundance of choices—which can become a challenge. Each spring, we can become overwhelmed by the many pots and plants that call to us. Following a trip to the nursery, we may long for the day when we simply filled our pots with a dracaena spike in the center, geraniums or petunias around it and a vinca vine or two trailing down the side. Ah, the simplicity of the past.

In the following pages, we will help you focus on what you like and will work for you, as well as provide tips for creating a container garden that you can enjoy throughout our long growing season.

## Location, Location, Location

**Tour your yard.** To begin, grab a notebook and pen and tour your yard to see where potted plants would beautify your landscape.

- Does your entryway need more color to welcome visitors?
- Does the hardscape of a patio, deck or retaining wall need softening?
- Do you want to screen out an undesirable view?
- Do you want to add height or interest to a boring area of your yard or garden?

**Note your microclimate.** Next jot down the climate conditions for your new container garden. Conditions such as the number of hours of sunlight the space receives and what the wind exposure is will influence the plants you select.

## Select Your Containers

To minimize the amount of watering you'll have to do, use the largest containers possible, based on the size of your site and your ability to lift and store them. Generally, you don't want anything smaller than a 14-inch or 16-inch pot, especially in a sunny, windy location. However, smaller pots are well-suited to patio tabletops. Deeper containers are typically better than wider ones as they allow for more space for roots to grow down in search of water and cooler temperatures.

All pots need drainage holes. If your pot does not have drainage holes add them using a drill bit or take it to a nursery which offers this service.

Use the following guidelines to find the type of pot that will work best for you.

Pot Style	Pros	Cons
Terra-cotta	Classic, attractive, affordable, beautiful patina with age	Heavy, fragile, porous (needs extra watering), cracks in winter
Plastic	Lightweight, affordable, retains moisture	Less attractive, fragile (make crack or break off)
Ceramic	Attractive, many colors	Heavy, costly, often no drainage
Wood	Affordable, can build yourself	Decays, not as attractive
Fiberglass	Lightweight, mimics natural materials, retains moisture	Costly
Concrete	Neutral color, porous (well draining)	Heavy, durable, can be left out in winter

## Preparing the Container

Choosing a growing medium is easy. Ignore any bags that contain soil in favor of a soilless potting mix. Mixes of peat, bark and either perlite or vermiculite are lighter than soil and hold water and oxygen for maximum plant growth. They have the added benefit of being sterile (weed and disease free). Many mixes now contain slow-release fertilizers, which feed your plants throughout the summer. Following are a few helpful tips.

1. When using large pots, move them to their permanent location before filling them.
2. Raise containers off wood and concrete surfaces with plant trivets, wood or bricks to prevent rotting and/or staining.
3. Cover the drainage hole with a coffee filter or piece of newspaper to prevent the potting mix from falling out. Don't cover it with anything that will inhibit drainage.
4. Fill your containers with the potting mix, leaving a one- to two-inch space between the soil level and the top of the pot to make watering easier. Do not add a filler of rock gravel or Styrofoam peanuts in the bottom of large pots. The soil should be as deep as possible to promote deep root growth and minimize watering needs.
5. When using saucers under pots, drain excess water to deter mosquito breeding

## Planting

Once your pots are ready, the fun of filling them begins. Except for formal designs, where restraint might call for a single clipped shrub or vertical topiary, the key word to remember is **FILL**. The best-looking containers are those packed with plants.

Deciding which plants to include is part art and part science ... and part borrowing ideas from others. Choose individual plants that delight as well as contribute to the overall beauty of the pot. Your personal taste can be guided by a few basic design principles.

- **Consider your pot.** Generally, plants in containers should not be more than one and a half times the height and width of the pot.
- **Vary your plant shapes.** Consider the planting regimen of thriller, filler and spiller. This is a popular way of designing the plant layout in a container with three distinct forms: the upright, the mounder and the trailer.
  - The upright acts as a vertical focal point and can be placed in the back or center of the pot.
  - Mounders, up to two-thirds the height of the upright, should be packed in to fill your container.
  - A few trailers can spill over the side to anchor the pot to the ground but remember that all the plants need to work together.
- **Add foliage plants for textural interest.** Plant leaves vary in texture, size, shape and color. As flowers fade, foliage plants will be going strong. Use them generously in your containers.
- **Or don't vary your plant shapes and add foliage.** Exceptions can be made to every rule. An alternative to variety in your container is a harmonious mass of similarly shaped and colored plants, such as a collection of pastel impatiens and tuberous begonias or white, orange and yellow cosmos and zinnias.
- **Think outside the pot.** Most people use annuals in containers because they are so reliable, colorful and productive. If you're adventurous, you might try small trees, shrubs, perennials and herbs. Because the blooming season for perennials is short, select plants that have attractive foliage for a long season of interest. Divide fast-growing perennials every few years in the spring and replot trees and shrubs that outgrow their containers.
- **Choose colors carefully.** Consider both bloom and foliage colors. Generally, two main colors and one minor accent suffice.
  - Harmonious colors can be either different shades of one color or hues next to each other on the color wheel (e.g., orange and yellow or red and purple).
  - Contrasting colors are opposite each other on the color wheel (blue and orange, purple and yellow).
    - Warm colors, such as red, orange and yellow, add drama.
    - Cool colors, such as blue and purple, and pastels are more relaxing.
    - Silver foliage harmonizes with all colors, toning down the hot colors and enhancing the cool ones. It also looks great with pink. White ties purples and blues together.

- **Decorate with your pots.** Just as you decorate your home with either one large painting as a focal point or groupings of smaller art objects, use that same approach in your yard. Group pots in pleasing arrangements, even raising them to add more interest or adding other accessories, such as a watering can or stone sculpture.

## Fertilizing

Fertilizing is a must if your potting mix does not contain fertilizer. Add a granular or water-soluble fertilizer at planting time. Follow the label directions carefully. Choose a balanced fertilizer (such as, 10-10-10 or 20-20-20), which indicates the percentages of nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium, respectively.

Nitrogen is a soluble nutrient and will wash out of the pot with frequent waterings. Phosphorous and potassium are insoluble. A pot containing annuals needs to be fertilized into the fall to ensure continued growth and blooms. Adding too much nitrogen, however, could lead to a reduction in blooms and increased vegetative growth.

## Maintenance

A few regular tasks will keep your pots looking incredible all season long.

- **Water.** Water your pots immediately after planting and later water to keep them evenly moist. Smaller pots in a hot, sunny, windy location might need watering several times a day. Large pots in shady, protected areas might need water only every three days. Check them carefully. To ensure that plants are thoroughly soaked, water slowly enough so that water trickles through the soil and eventually streams out the drainage hole.
- **Deadhead.** Pick off old blossoms to prolong blooming and keep plants neat.
- **Prune.** Pinch back any plants that get leggy to encourage bushy growth and more blooms.
- **Groom.** Remove dead leaves and stalks to keep plants attractive. If they seem spent late in the season, replace them with fall blooms.

## Season's End

Like garden beds, containers need to be prepared for winter.

- **Pots with annuals** can be emptied (recycle the potting mix into your compost pile or planting beds), washed (with a 10% bleach solution, then rinsed thoroughly) and stacked for storage. It's best to replace your potting mix yearly, but you can reuse it if you mix it with equal parts of new soil-less mix the following spring.
- **Pots with perennials** can be stored in a garage or shed, watering moderately every three to four weeks. Perennials, trees and shrubs that are hardy to Zones 3 or 4 can overwinter outside in their pots. You can bring herb pots indoors to use throughout the winter.
- **Terra cotta and clay pots** might crack if left outside where the potting mix will expand and shrink with freezing and thawing temperatures.

## **Sources**

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