

The Essentialist

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Container Gardening

There are six major steps to container gardening: choosing your plants, finding the right size and type of containers for them, preparing the containers, buying or mixing the proper soil, planting, and regular care.

Suitable plants for containers

Almost any: fruit trees, vegetables, vines, herbs. With planning you can grow a mix of companion plants in one container. You'll have better results if you select dwarf tree stock, disease resistant plants, and plants specifically developed for containers. Check with your local nursery and online seed catalogues.

Types of containers

You can use almost anything as long as it's deep enough for the mature root system, wide enough not to crowd mature plant material, and with enough holes in the bottom for adequate drainage. Buy containers, or look around for what you can find that will work.

Containers are heavy once filled with plants and especially after watering. If that is a problem choose plastic containers or baskets. Wood containers last the longest but are heavier and harder to move.

Examples of containers are:

Clay pots, plain or glazed
Plastic tubs, pots, bowls, troughs, garbage cans, pails
Window boxes
Window sills
Baskets, fiber containers
Trellises
Wood barrels, tubs (longest lasting are redwood or cedar)
Chimney tiles
Plant bags

Don't use a container that has had anything toxic in it before. When you clean a pre-used or found container, scour it with a stiff brush and a 10% bleach to water solution. Rinse many times. Let it dry in the sun.

Clay containers lose moisture faster than plastic containers, but they allow more air circulation around the roots than plastic ones do. To compensate, put more holes in the bottom of plastic containers, and water clay containers more often.

Soils

Find out what kind of planting medium is best for the plants you've selected. Plants are as variable as we are in their needs. What all planting mediums have in common is that they must not hold water too long (clay) or lose it too fast (sand), and should be friable enough to allow air circulation around the roots.

Nurseries have a variety of excellent packaged soils.

You can make your own. You can either buy the ingredients to make a soilless mix, or you can mix earth from your yard with amendments (humus, peat, perlite, vermiculite, sawdust etc.) and organic or inorganic materials (dolomite lime, potassium, phosphates, blood meal, bone meal, etc.) If you use soil from your yard, have it tested first. That will tell you what PH your soil is, and what it may be lacking.

When mixing soil, it's handy to have a big tub, and a wheel barrow and small shovel in order to distribute it to larger containers.

Planting

Before planting, soak the container to "season" it. That way the dry pot won't steal too much moisture from the new plant.

Choose the location for large plants and pot them there. After planting, to fully soak the soil, water until it comes out the bottom. If you need to guard against water marks on your deck, put a rolling tray, saucer, bricks, wood or plastic beneath the container. Then put four inches of mulch on top of the soil (sphagnum moss, compost, small bark, crumpled newspaper, etc.) Put plastic, newspaper or cardboard under the fruit of trellised crops (melons, zucchini, beans etc.) if they touch the ground.

Don't water every day. Use the finger test to see if the plant needs water. The larger the container the deeper your finger can go until it feels damp soil. The deepest you should go is to the first bend of your finger. Every three weeks, water until it comes out the bottom to wash away salt accumulation. Use a spritz bottle to keep water hungry leaves hydrated. Hand water, or set up an automated irrigation system if you have a lot of container to take care of.

The amount and type of fertilizer needed will vary from plant to plant according to type and size. Container plants do need fertilizing more often than plants in the ground. You can buy commercial fertilizers, use a fish emulsion periodically when watering, or create your own fertilizing concoction.

Locations

Cool weather plants like cucumbers and lettuce need a minimum of four hours of sunshine. Screen them from the heat of the southern and western sun. Plants like tomatoes need a minimum of six hours of sun. Put them in the hottest part of your deck or porch. Trim dead leaves and blossoms. Check for pests. Pick fruit regularly to encourage more production.