

C ontainer Gardening

John W. Jett, Ph.D.
Extension Specialist – Horticulture

Introduction

If you don't have space for a vegetable garden or if your outdoor space doesn't provide the necessary elements to produce the flower garden you've always wanted, consider the possibility of "container gardening." A patio, deck, balcony, or doorstep can provide enough space for a productive, attractive display.

If you live in an apartment with limited outdoor space, you might consider doing a little indoor gardening. By using sunny windowsills, you can grow a number of herbs in containers.

Benefits

Many individuals find container gardening to be advantageous. Each person is unique and has his or her own particular circumstances. They may be:

- ◆ disabled with a need for easy accessibility
- ◆ gardeners with problem soil
- ◆ homeowners with little or no land
- ◆ elderly with limited mobility
- ◆ apartment/condominium dwellers
- ◆ cooks—gourmet and otherwise
- ◆ plant lovers who just can't get enough of nature

What You'll Need

Appropriate Containers

Containers are available in many sizes, shapes, and materials. All containers, whether clay, wood, plastic, or ceramic, should have an adequate number of holes in the bottom for proper drainage. Additional holes should be drilled or punched in containers that do not drain quickly after each watering. Setting the container on a solid surface, such as a

concrete or patio floor, reduces drainage. Raising the container one or two inches off the floor by setting it on blocks of wood will solve this problem.

The container's size will be determined by the plant selected. Generally, most plants grown in the soil can be grown in containers as long as ample space is provided for them to develop roots. Shallow-rooted crops like lettuce, peppers, radishes, herbs, and most annuals need a container at least 6 inches in diameter with an 8-inch soil depth. Bushel baskets, half barrels, wooden tubs, or large pressed paper containers are ideal for growing tomatoes, squash, pole beans, cucumbers, and deep-rooted perennials.

Media

A fairly lightweight mix is needed for container gardening. Soil straight from the garden usually cannot be used in a container because it is too heavy, unless your garden has sandy loam or sandy soil. Clay soil consists of extremely small (microscopic) particles. In a container, the bad qualities of clay are exaggerated. It holds too much moisture when wet, resulting in too little air for the roots. Also, it pulls away from the sides of the pot when dry.

Fertilizer

Fertilize plants with the recommended rate of water-soluble fertilizer every two to three weeks. An occasional application of fish emulsion or compost will add trace elements to the soil. Do not add more than the recommended rate of any fertilizer. Doing so may cause fertilizer burn and kill your plants. Unlike garden plants, container plants do not have the buffer of large volumes of soil and humus to protect them from overfertilizing or overliming.

Water Requirements

Pay particular attention to watering container plants. Because the volume of soil is relatively small,

containers can dry out very quickly, especially if they are on a concrete patio in full sun light. Daily or twice-daily watering may be necessary. Apply water until it runs out the drainage holes.

Light Requirements

The amount of sunlight your container garden spot receives may determine which crops can be grown. Check light requirements for specific plants. Available light can be increased somewhat by providing reflective materials, such as aluminum foil, white-painted surfaces, and marble chips, around plants.

Plant Material

Plants suited for container culture*

Vegetables

Beans, Bush	Eggplant	Peppers, Bell
Beets	Kale	Squash, Summer
Carrots	Lettuce, Leaf	Tomatoes
Cabbage	Mustard Greens	Tomatoes, Cherry
Chard, Swiss	Onions, Green	Turnips
Cucumbers		

Herbs

<i>Annuals</i>	Anise	Dill
	Basil	Coriander
	Chervil	Summer Savory
<i>Biennials</i>	Caraway	Parsley
<i>Perennials</i>	Chives	Mint
	Fennel	Tarragon
	Lovage	Thyme
	Marjoram	Winter Savory

Fruits

Apples (dwarf spur-type)	Raspberries
Blackberries	Strawberries
Blueberries	

Annual Flowers

Ageratum	Dusty Miller	Pansy
Alyssum	Geranium	Petunia
Begonia	Impatiens	Salvia
Celosia	Lobelia	Snapdragon
Coleus	Marigold	Verbena
Dianthus	Nasturtium	Zinnia

Perennial Flowers

Achillea (Yarrow)	Lupine
Aquilegia (Columbine)	Rudbeckia
Candytuft	Sedum

Chrysanthemum	Shasta Daisy
Gaillardia	Veronica
Gypsophila	

Exotic Foliage

Alocasia	Hibiscus
Banana	Lantana
Caladium	Palm
Cannas (variegated and red-leafed varieties)	Phygelius
Coconut	Pygmy Date Palm
Dracaena	Schefflera
Elephant Ears	Variegated Ficus
	White Bird of Paradise

Bulbs

<i>Fall-planted</i>	Crocus	Scilla
	Daffodil	Tulip
	Iris	
<i>Spring-planted</i>	Begonia	Gladiolus
	Dahlia	Oriental and Asiatic Lily

* Consult catalogs for cultural requirements and varieties adapted to container culture.

References

- Bartholomew, Mel *Square Foot Gardening*, St. Martins Press, New York City, NY, 1981.
- Berry, Susan and Bradley, Steve *Contained Gardens*, Ballentine Fawcett, Division of Random House, New York City, NY, 1995.
- Holmes, Roger *Taylor's Guide to Container Gardening*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, MA, 1995.
- Yang, Linda *The City Gardeners Handbook*, Random House, New York City, NY, 1990.

1998: 10M

Programs and activities offered by the West Virginia University Extension Service are available to all persons without regard to race, color, sex, disability, religion, age, veteran status, sexual orientation or national origin. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Director, Cooperative Extension Service, West Virginia University.