

My Guide to Container Gardening

By: Dottie Baltz

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The following is my advice on growing ornamentals in containers for outdoor use. Be advised that techniques can differ based on your geographical location, the type of plants being grown and whether they are indoor or outdoor containers.

Choosing your Container

Choose larger containers whenever possible so you don't have to water them as often. I try and stay away from unsealed clay pots as they absorb a lot of water. I still love the look of clay though, so you can soak them overnight in water before use and that will help retain moisture. You can also seal the outside of new clay pots with a specially formulated clay pot sealer or by brushing on clear polyurethane. Painting the pots with acrylic paints will also help to seal the pots, though you will want to seal the paint also to preserve your paint job.

Containers come in a variety of materials, shapes and sizes such as clay, plastic, concrete, ceramic, wood and resin. I prefer plastic and resin as they are lightweight, relatively inexpensive, last for many years and come in hundreds of shapes, sizes, colors and designs. Whatever you choose, make sure there are adequate drainage holes. Many resin containers do not have holes drilled in them so you can use them for other things, such as a water garden. They are very easy to drill, however, with a standard ¼" - ½" drill bit. They also sell containers that are self watering which can come in handy on hot days or while on vacation.

When using especially large pots, take into consideration what they will weigh when full and if they will need to be moved once you set them in place. If there is any chance you will have to move them, I'd suggest putting them on a plant dolly before filling the container with soil and plants. Plant dollies are usually flat and made of weather resistant wood or metal and have four caster wheels on them. They come in different sizes depending on your pot and are usually not visible when under the container. Make sure the weight rating on the dolly can handle the weight of the container when full of soil, plants and water.

Remember that most anything that can hold soil can be used as a container for plants, providing it has proper drainage holes, so use your imagination and have fun with it.

Choosing Your Growing Medium

Soil for containers should be lightweight and airy to allow the roots of your plants to get the oxygen and moisture they need to be healthy. Soil from your garden is too heavy and should not be used.

I tend to buy prepackaged potting soil in large bags at my local garden center or discount store because it's easier for me, though I know many people who like to mix their own potting soil. I also like to add 1 part compost to 4 parts potting soil to my containers as I feel it helps to retain moisture better than potting soil alone without smothering the roots. The compost also adds important nutrients and organisms to the soil that plants need to survive.

Keep in mind that some plants may require special soils such as cacti, vegetables, and orchids so the plant's needs should be researched before planting, but generally a potting mix containing equal parts peat moss, compost and builder's sand will work for most plants. When making your own soil mixes, it's important to add a slow release fertilizer to the mix, following the manufacturer's instructions on the fertilizer label. I like to use organic slow release fertilizers as they are less likely to burn your plants and they will last for a longer period of time.

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How to Plant

When planting your containers, choose plants that need similar light, water, and fertilizer requirements. You wouldn't want to plant cacti with petunias. Though they both like sun, the cacti like it dry with little fertilizer and the petunias need lots of water and fertilizer. Most annuals work well in containers, but don't rule out perennials. Just know that if you live in a colder climate, you may have to transplant perennials into the garden come fall because they most likely will not survive in the container all winter.

Choose plants with varying heights and textures and complimentary colors for your containers. And don't forget about foliage plants. They will add interest when the flowering plants are between bloom cycles.

I like to plant in groups of odd numbers. For example: A tall "focal point" plant will be in the middle surrounded by three evenly spaced medium sized plants, with three low growing or trailing plants between those. I also like to design my containers the way I would design a vase full of flowers. Choose a "focal point" plant that is approximately 1-1/2 times taller than the height of your container when it is full grown. For example, if your pot is only 6" tall, then you wouldn't want a plant in it more than 9" tall when it's full grown or the container will look top heavy.

I prefer to pre-moisten my potting soil before adding it to my containers, especially if the mix is heavy in peat moss. Peat moss can be difficult to hydrate so it could take some time. One way is to add warm water to the potting mix as the peat moss absorbs warm water faster than cold water. Either way stirring the water into the potting mix will help it to absorb faster. Add water until the soil begins to stick together when you squeeze it in your hand.

I like to use water absorbing crystals in my potting mixes. These crystals will absorb water and then release it into the soil when the soil dries out, thereby allowing you to, theoretically, water less. I find I still have to water most everyday, but the plants are less stressed between waterings, especially on hot days. It's important to soak these crystals in water before adding them to the potting mix, otherwise they will expand while in the pot. Some potting mixes already contain these crystals, which is another good reason why you should pre-moisten your potting mixes. Complete instructions can be found on the jar and they are available at most home centers and good nurseries.

I like to pick a morning, when all danger of frost is past, and pot up all my containers at once. It saves so much time that way. Put your potting soil in a wheel barrow or some other large flat container so it is easy to mix. Add water and the crystals as directed above. Fill the containers approximately halfway with potting mix then add your plants. Check the plants to see if they are root bound. If the roots are wrapped around themselves in a circle, gently try to pull some of the roots apart before planting. This helps them to get better established in the containers, but to be honest, I rarely do this unless they are severely root bound. Add soil around the plants until you are about 1-1/2"-2" from the top of the container. The plants should also not be planted any deeper than they were in their original container. Press the soil down and water thoroughly to remove any air pockets from around the roots. I like to also add a thin layer of mulch to my containers. This will help to retain moisture and also to keep soil off your plants during rains and regular watering. I prefer to use finally shredded bark, but you can use what is readily available in your area or what is appropriate for that particular plant.

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Container Location

The location of your container is strictly up to you, but keep in mind the plant's sun requirements when choosing a location. Most plants grown in containers will benefit from some afternoon shade. I've found that when my containers are planted with sun loving annuals and get 4-5 hours of morning sun and then shade or dappled sun/shade the rest of the day, they do extremely well. Many shade loving annuals seem to do well in my area when given a bright shade with no direct light for the entire day, such as a under tree or a covered porch. If you live farther south, you may need to provide your plants with more shade than someone in the far north.

I also like to group my containers together. This makes it easier to water them as well as making a bigger statement. Group pots with similar or complimentary styles and colors together taking into consideration their different heights. A group of three containers with heights of 20", 16", and 10" is more appealing to the eye than grouping all the same size pots together. If all your pots are the same size, then use other objects to elevate the pots off the ground at varying heights. Upside down clay pots work well for this as do scraps of lumber and old bricks. Just make sure your pots are supported well on the base so they don't tip over and you can use the smaller pots to camouflage the base of the elevated pots.

If you are limited in the number of containers you have, then place them where you will see them most often so that you can enjoy the fruits of your labor and also so you don't forget to water them. Entrances to your home or patio and deck areas are good locations to get you started. I also like to place containers throughout my regular garden area to help fill in bare spots or just to add some height and interest. It's also a good way to test drive a new plant. For example: Maybe you are looking to add a spiky plant to an area planted with hostas, and are not sure if you will like it there. Pot up the plant in question and set it in different spots around the garden until you find the right one, then it can be planted directly in the garden.

Watering and Fertilizing

Watering may need to be done everyday, especially when the heat of summer kicks in. I check my containers every morning and again in the later afternoon by either sticking my finger into the soil to see if it's dry or by simply lifting the pot to feel how heavy it is. A very lightweight container indicates that it needs watering. Always water the plant until water comes out of the bottom of the container. If the container has a saucer on the bottom, allow the water to drain into the saucer and then dump out the water. Never allow your plants to sit in water. If you are using self watering containers, fill the reservoir with water as needed. In extremely hot conditions, I have also had to water them from the top. You can do what's best for you and most come with instructions from the manufacturer.

If it has rained, don't assume that your plants don't need watering. It's still important to check the pots because for some reason, when it rains, the pots never seem to get watered as much as you think they will.

I prefer to use an organic water soluble fertilizer, at half strength, once a week to supplement the slow release fertilizer that was added to the soil. This is especially important for flowering annuals. But check the requirements of the plant before assuming it needs fertilizer. Nasturtiums prefer not to be fertilized. If your plants are producing more foliage than blooms, but otherwise appear healthy, consider cutting back on the fertilizer.

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Maintenance

Depending on the types of plants you have chosen, there will be a small amount of maintenance involved with your containers. Besides the usual watering and fertilizing, you should also deadhead your spent blooms to keep your flowers blooming well and to keep your containers looking neat and tidy.

You may also find that some plants just look plain raggedy after a long hot summer. You can remove these plants and replace them with new plants at any time. Over the years, you'll find what plants work best for you. Some plants may also get leggy over time, such as with petunias and coleus. Pinching these plants back an inch or two every few weeks will promote a more compact bushier growth habit.

Plant Suggestions

Following are some of my favorite plants to use in containers. You may notice there are not very many perennials since they will not survive our winters in the pots, but I plan on experimenting with some in the future and then planting them at the end of the season.

Plants for Sun

Cardinal Flower
Chrysanthemums
Cosmos (Dwarf Varieties)
Dahlias (Dwarf Varieties)
Dusty Miller
Geraniums
Hens and Chicks
Licorice Plant
Marigolds
Morning Glories
Ornamental Millet (For Large Containers)
Nasturtiums (Prefer Cooler Weather)
Nicotiana – Flowering Tobacco
Ornamental Peppers
Petunias (Especially Wave Variety)
Portulaca
Salvia
Snapdragons (Cool Weather Plant)
Spike Dracena
Sunflowers (Dwarf Varieties)
Sweet Alyssum
Verbana
Vinca Vine
Zinnias (Dwarf Varities)

Plants for Shade

Begonias
Caladiums
Coleus
Elephant Ears
Fuschia
Impatiens
Nasturtiums (Bright Shade)
Nicotiana (Bright Shade)
Pansies (Cool Weather Plant)
Polka Dot Plant
Violas (Cool Weather Plant)