

Gardening in containers may be a necessity for those who live in apartments or condos, or it may be a way to accent an outdoor landscape or home interior with beautiful pottery and interesting specimen plants. Whatever the goal, container gardening employs different methods and materials than gardening in-ground.

**CONTAINER:** Each type has its advantages and disadvantages. *Plastic* is lightweight and inexpensive, but may look cheap and deteriorate. *Terra Cotta* is inexpensive and readily available, but can discolor. *Glazed Pottery* is beautiful and long-lasting, but more expensive and heavy. Other options include wood, Hypertufa, metal, or any creative receptacle. Choose a container that is only slightly larger than the rootball of the plant – about 2-5” bigger. If a plant is planted in a pot that is too big, the plant often suffers – the soil doesn’t dry out properly. Also, consider using a saucer to protect floors or patios from moisture. The leachate from potting soil may also stain. Saucers help provide a reservoir of water, too, to help plants in the summer.

**SOIL:** For containers smaller than 20 gallons a good quality *potting soil* must be used. If a *garden soil* or *topsoil* is used in these smaller pots, it will compact, and the plant roots will suffer. Potting soils, on the other hand, are designed to stay fluffy and well-aerated. For acid-loving plants such as gardenias, mix pre-moistened **peat moss** about half and half with the potting soil to maintain acidity. For xeric plants and native plants, use a very well draining, high mineral/low organic matter soil.

For containers larger than 20 gallons, such as stock tanks or whiskey barrels, a garden-type soil may be used, but it should be one that drains extremely well. Xeric and well-adapted plants enjoy this soil as is. For plants that need more moisture, **potting soils** can be added, up to 50% by volume, to maintain the fluffiness of the soil in these larger containers. For acid loving plants, add peat moss as described above.

**FERTILIZING:** For non-native plants such as vegetables, annual flowers, gardenias, and the like, mix in an organic fertilizer to the soil before planting. Use a fertilizer appropriate for the type of plant in the container (leafy plants generally prefer a higher-nitrogen fertilizer, while flowering and fruiting plants prefer more phosphorous). Reapply fertilizer about every month for annuals or vegetables. For shrubs or well-adapted plants, add fertilizer at half the recommended rate every spring and fall. A liquid fertilizer may be used every week or two for veggies and annuals; every month or two for adapted plants. Use a combination of these dry and liquid fertilizers for optimum nutrition and soil conditioning. If you want to, use a mineral supplement, too.

**PLANTING:** The method for planting in a container is the same as planting in the ground. Dig the hole exactly as deep as the rootball of the plant. Do not to cover up the stem of the plant, unless it is a tomato! Several different plants can be planted in one container for a dramatic effect, or for an instant vegetable garden. In this case, choose plants with all the same water and sun requirements. Although ornamental plants can be somewhat crowded into a pot for instant beauty, consider each plant’s ultimate size. The more crowded plants are in a pot, the sooner they will need to be transplanted into a bigger pot. Try to give each plant the space it needs to grow. Water thoroughly immediately after planting. Add a layer of mulch, stone, or another material on top for a finished look. This layer also helps to hold in moisture and prevents soil from splashing up on the plants.

**WATERING:** Plants in containers need more frequent watering than those in the ground. Annuals and vegetables need consistent moisture. In the summer, they will likely need water *at least* once a day. Native and more xeric plants should dry out *almost* completely between waterings. The best moisture meter is your finger: dig into the soil as deeply as possible to feel the soil for moisture. Occasionally feel the soil from the hole in the bottom of the pot too, if possible. Sometimes the soil will be dry on top, but saturated at the bottom.

**REPOTTING:** Eventually, most plants outgrow their container and become root bound. Indicators that a plant needs repotting are: a decline in growth, frequent need for watering or an inability of the soil to absorb water, and an obvious mass of crowded roots when the plant is pulled out of its pot. Transplant as in the PLANTING section above. If the plant is root bound, be sure to gently pull some of the roots out of their circling pattern before transplanting into a bigger pot.

Enjoy!