

Container Gardening



Growing your garden in pots on a deck, patio, fire escape or balcony offers a cheerful profusion of flowers, tasty fresh vegetables and savory herbs to enjoy in containers of all sizes and shapes.

Whether you have a little space or a lot, container gardening is an easy way to create an inviting and relaxing outdoor space and add enjoyment to the seasons.

Your garden can be anywhere that gets at least six hours of sun a day; one of my gardening pen-pals grows her eggplants in big pots on the converted tugboat she and her husband live on! For people with limited time or physical capacities container gardening is a special source of satisfaction. If you are a cooking-oriented gardener, you'll find having containers of your favorite kitchen herbs close at hand is a real advantage.

Container Herbs

I plant my favorite herbs in 4 or 5 pots set outside on the kitchen patio so I can get to them quickly whenever a recipe needs a little herbal zing. I always plant **basil** in a big pot so I can use lots in salads, pesto, sauces and sautés and, late in summer when plants start to flower, I pick the blossoms for fragrant edible garnishes. Strappy mounds of flowering **chives** and shiny broadleaf **parsley** are also delicious and attractive as are low mounding shrubby perennials such as **oregano**. I grow lots of **cilantro** in its own big pot to add to salsa, guacamole, grilled shrimp and chicken.

Container herbs need little weeding and can be moved easily. When the sun gets intense and hot,



I move the container to where it gets afternoon shade so plants stay leafy as long as possible.

Container Flowers

Free-flowering annuals are perfect choices to bring out the artist in every gardener. We've chosen these varieties not only for their individual beauty but for the way they'll look in your containers. **Whirlybird Nasturtiums** cascade in abundance, **Little Ladybirds Cosmos** fills containers with sparkling bright blooms, and **Dwarf Heirloom Cupid Sweet Peas** are graceful plants with exquisite perfume. Favorites like the lovely dwarf varieties **Pixie Sunshine Zinnias** add season-long color and cheerful **Junior Sunflowers** bring a smile to the garden every day.

If you'd like to branch out and grow some special perennials that come back every year, try **Angel Wing Roses** or ornamental and delicious **Alpine Strawberries**.

You can plant one variety to a container and cluster them all around your patio to take advantage of different microclimates – 3 medium sized pots placed together will make a beautiful combination of color and form. Or you can plant a mixed bouquet in a big container at least 18 inches wide. In combining flowers, keep their final heights in mind, planting low trailing plants at the outer edge, medium ones inside and the tallest varieties at the center. Space plants closely, about 4 inches apart, so they will grow to cover the container's surface. Be sure to feed them regularly to encourage lush growth.

Container Vegetables

Growing an edible container garden is easy and rewarding. Specially developed for growing in containers, these compact varieties of delicious **tomatoes**, little sweet peppers, tender **baby lettuce**, crunchy **cucumbers** and handsome **golden chard**



will reward you with beautiful plants and abundant harvests you can plan meals around. In spring and fall, you can grow all kinds of cool season specialties such as spinach, pak choi, sugar snap peas and salads of all kinds – all are wonderful ornamental edibles. Container veggies need a good rich soil mix, and plenty of room for an ample root system with careful attention to regular watering and fertilizing. Their attractive foliage and colorful harvests are decorative as well as delicious.

Remember that all container plants need more attention than plants in the ground, as they rely solely on the gardener for all their needs. Confined to a limited space, they will quickly become stressed if essential water or fertilizer isn't available regularly. It's not hard to provide a good growing environment; just remember the essentials

A Quick Course in Container Gardening

- Properly drained soil mix
- Adequate and regular supplemental fertilizer
- Enough but not too much water
- The right amount of light
- Some protection from temperature extremes

Use a properly drained soil mix – don't use garden soil for containers! A good commercial potting mix will give consistent drainage, is free of weeds and pests, and it won't compact to a rock-hard mass that water can't penetrate by midsummer. I always replenish the soil mix for containers at the beginning of each season to restore the fluffy texture of the soil in my pots and ensure the best conditions for young plants.

Gardening in containers isn't very complicated. Start by using the right sized containers for the plants you mean to grow. They can be whatever type of container suits your eye and pocket book, from



fancy big clay pots, lightweight pots and window boxes, to wine barrels, recycled pulp containers, wooden boxes or even big drain tiles. Just be sure they are large enough to hold the full-grown plants and their root systems and provide good drainage and air circulation

all season long.

Water and remove spent blooms on container plants regularly and make it a part of your everyday routine. In the heat of summer, containers may need water every day. I put my forefinger in the soil and if it is dry beyond the first joint, I water immediately. Feed your container plants throughout the season with 1/2 strength commercial liquid fertilizer, applying it to the soil about every 3 weeks. Being an organic gardener, I use and recommend a homemade fertilizing solution of 1 tablespoon each of liquid fish emulsion and liquid kelp mixed in 1 gallon of water.

I also adjust for the blast of summer heat by keeping my containers on plant caddies so I can move them around. You should be able to find these wooden or plastic platforms with wheeled casters at a local nursery. Another advantage is that the platforms keep containers from staining the patio (or deck). And, if I go away for the weekend, the containers can easily be wheeled and grouped in a cooler, shadier space so they won't dry out while I'm away.

Moveable Feasts of Color

Consider your container plants as moveable design accessories of your "outdoor rooms." Rearrange them to enjoy a new flush of bloom or scent and to meet their needs for sun or shade. I love to have blooming, or fruiting leafy containers next to my patio and lawn chairs, on my picnic table and along my daily pathways to delight all my senses throughout the season.