

Guide To Container Herb Gardening

Choosing the Right Container

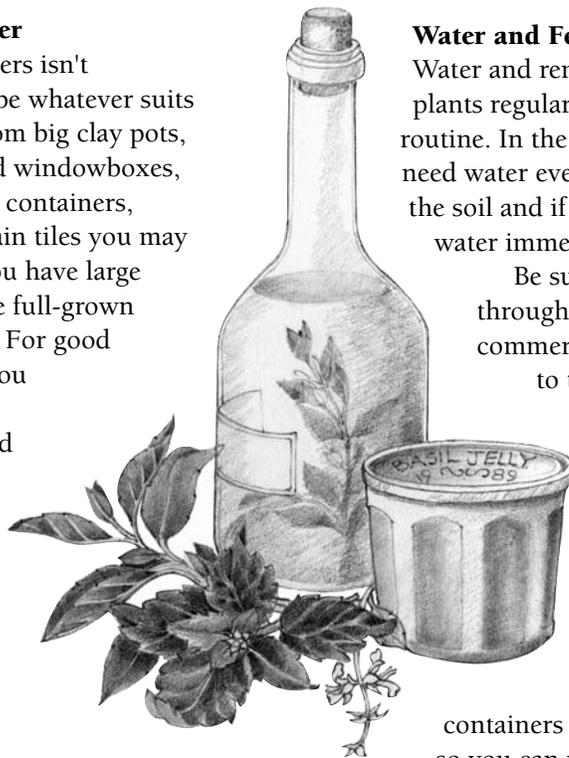
Herb Gardening in containers isn't complicated. Containers can be whatever suits your eye and pocket book, from big clay pots, lighter weight plastic pots and windowboxes, to wine barrels, recycled pulp containers, wooden boxes or even big drain tiles you may have available. Just be sure you have large enough containers to hold the full-grown plants and their root systems. For good drainage and air circulation, you should have a little air space between container bottoms and the ground: use wedges or flat stones or a plant stand to raise them up a bit.

Remember that 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 water or fertilizer isn't available regularly. It's easy to provide a good growing environment; just remember the essentials:

- 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

Soil Matters

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



Water and Fertilize

Water and remove spent blooms on container plants regularly and make it a part of your daily routine. In the heat of summer, containers may need water every day. Put your forefinger in the soil and if it is dry beyond the first joint, water immediately.

Be sure to feed your container plants throughout the season with 1/2 strength commercial liquid fertilizer, applying it to the soil about every 3 weeks.

There are many good organic fertilizers, but an economical homemade fertilizing solution can be made with 1 tablespoon each of liquid fish emulsion and liquid kelp mixed into 1 gallon of water.

Adjust for the blast of summer heat by keeping your containers on plant stands with castor wheels so you can move them around with the sun exposure. If you go away for the weekend, the containers can easily be wheeled to a cooler space out of direct sun so they won't dry out as quickly while you are away. The platforms will also keep containers from staining the patio or deck. You should be able to find these wooden or plastic platforms fitted with castor wheels at a local nursery.

Moveable Feasts

Consider your container herb plants as design accessories for your "outdoor rooms"; move them around throughout the season and rearrange them as suits your fancy or their need for sun or shade. Place them where you will most enjoy a new flush of bloom or scent and where they will be readily available to snip for everyday cooking. I love to have these aromatic, leafy containers next to my patio chairs, around my picnic table and close to where I walk everyday. They please my senses throughout the gardening season.

Using Your Container Herbs

Profuma di Genova Basil has a rich, slightly spicy flavor with overtones of cloves. Use it lavishly for perfect fresh pesto sauce and as an addition to soups, stir-fries and casseroles and to flavor a simple vinaigrette salad dressing. Basil is the soul mate of both fresh tomatoes and tomato sauce. Add fresh chopped basil to seasoned rice, potatoes, eggplant, peppers, carrots or onions.

- Puree fresh basil leaves with enough extra virgin olive oil to liquefy it and freeze in zip lock bags to make zesty pesto sauce in winter. It's best to add the other pesto ingredients (grated Parmesan cheese, crushed garlic, fresh pepper, toasted pine nuts) when you actually prepare the sauce for serving.
- Select big leaves of basil and roll them around shrimps or slivers of smoked ham or cheese, securing with fancy toothpicks for appetizers.
- Add shredded basil leaves to mixed greens and garnish with juicy sections of fresh oranges or tangerines for a colorful salad.

Dukat Dill's finely cut, blue-green fronds have sweetly aromatic flavors that make them a welcome addition to leafy green or cool cucumber salads. Add them to cooked vegetables, especially carrots, corn, tomatoes and green beans. When the plants form seed heads, use the comma-shaped spicy seeds to flavor all sorts of pickles, pea soup and top savory breads and rolls.

- Skin and seed 4 to 6 fresh tomatoes and sauté them very slowly in 3 T. of olive oil for 10 to 15 minutes. Season with a pinch of sea salt and a big handful of chopped fresh dill. Serve over grilled chicken breasts.
- Braise chunks of summer squash and white onions until tender in chicken broth, then toss with a handful of chopped fresh dill leaf and a little butter.

Italian Gigante Parsley's clean sweet taste enhances individual flavors without overwhelming them. This heirloom variety has a mild, rich taste and a juicy texture with no metallic overtones that make it a great addition to green salads, egg dishes, steamed vegetables, beans, pasta and rice dishes.

- Combine 2/3 cup chopped Italian parsley with 2 cloves of freshly minced garlic and 1-1/2 T. grated lemon zest as a quick and healthy topping for baked potatoes, plain broiled chicken or any mild flavored baked fish.

- A generous amount of coarsely chopped Italian parsley enhances the flavor of even the blandest lettuce salad and is a treat on steamed rice, tomatoes or grilled eggplants and peppers.
- Linguini, cooked until just tender and then tossed with good olive oil, minced garlic, lots of chopped Italian parsley and grated cheese is a meal in itself.

Fine Leaf Chives, the most subtle member of the onion family are mounding perennial plants and sport lovely pinky-purple edible blossoms in early summer. Snip off chive leaves with scissors to set off the flavor of green salads, eggs, potatoes and rice, casseroles and cheese dishes—wherever a sweet, mild onion flavor is desired.

- Combine sweet butter, softened with a little fresh squeezed lemon juice, chopped fresh chives and freshly ground pepper. Serve with steamed or grilled corn.
- Use scissors to snip chives over egg, tuna, chicken or potato salads. The chives add color and a soft oniony accent that sets off the other flavors.
- Make a chive blossom omelet by sprinkling 4 chive blossoms, broken into individual florets and 3T. grated Swiss cheese down the center of a 4 egg omelet, just before folding the gently cooked eggs in half to serve.

Slow-Bolt Cilantro's spicy pungent leaves taste best when added at the end of cooking or sprinkled over dishes as you serve them. Eat fresh because their flavor doesn't survive drying or freezing. In hot summer weather, keep your cilantro plants in clear bright shade rather than full sun so the plants stay leafy as long as possible.

- Cilantro makes a fine Southwest pesto sauce. Use cilantro, olive oil, pumpkin seeds, garlic, and aged Monterey Jack or Asiago cheese.
- Add chopped fresh cilantro to any bean dish or homemade soup just before serving to really enhance their flavors.
- Cilantro pairs well with any fresh citrus.
- Add fruity olive oil and chopped garlic and you have a fine marinade for poultry, shrimp or salmon.
- Add chopped fresh cilantro and fresh ground pepper to a plate of fresh sliced tomatoes, cubed feta cheese and drizzled with olive oil for a great first course.