



## GROWING IN CONTAINERS

Container gardening is extremely popular today, it's compact, flexible, and portable. It's also great fun and can be very creative. City gardeners with limited space can grow everything from fruits and vegetables to beautiful flower gardens, trees and shrubs in containers. Success is just a matter of providing the basic needs of plants: adequate growing medium, sufficient light, proper temperature and necessary moisture and nutrients. Plants will grow in just about anything that will hold soil, so the art of container gardening is limited only by the imagination.

### Choosing a container

Many types and styles are available. Planters can be strictly functional or can serve to enhance the beauty of plants. For successful growing it's crucial to provide the right environment for roots to develop. A general rule of thumb for the size of a container, especially for growing vegetables and herbs, is 'the bigger the better'. Larger planters provide more space for multi-row plantings and more beautiful displays. They hold more planting medium and nutrients and require less frequent watering.

*Terracotta:* Clay pots are available in many shapes and sizes. They can be found in simple, plain surfaces or ornate, intricate designs and are relatively inexpensive. Clay pots are porous and 'breathe'. Check if they are frost proof.

*Plastic:* Inexpensive and available in a multitude of sizes, shapes and designer colours. These containers are water-tight and non-porous. The advantage of a non-porous material is that it holds water but the disadvantage is that soil is not allowed to 'breathe' or aerate and more care must be taken to ensure adequate drainage.

*Concrete:* Concrete planters are extremely durable and may be painted, antiqued or left natural.

*Wood:* Wood can be used to create natural planters or planting areas. Planters may be stained, painted or left natural. Unseasoned wood should be treated with a safe preservative.

*Bricks, Concrete Blocks, Stone:* These materials can be used to create interesting custom planters. If left unmortared, they can be easily expanded or altered as the situation requires.

*Hanging Baskets:* Plastic hanging baskets are durable and may have built-in drainage reservoirs. These containers are flat on the bottom which makes them easy to plant and stand on surfaces while plants are being established. Wire baskets can be lined with coconut matting and allow for plants to be grown through the sides allowing for more naturalistic effects. Wicker work baskets also give a more natural effect and are usually lined with plastic for moisture retention.

*Window Boxes:* Window boxes are good for seasonal displays and to accent the architecture. Sunny locations are usually preferable, but boxes can be adapted to a more permanent display using plants that will do well even in shady areas.

*Unusual and Improvised Containers:* Anything which holds an adequate amount of compost, provides ample planting depth, drainage and does not expose plants to toxic chemicals, may be used for growing plants ... be creative!

## Watering: making sure containers don't dry out

Crucial to success when planting herbs and vegetables in containers is watering during dry spells, especially as plants become larger and need more water. During very hot weather pots may need daily watering and hanging baskets twice daily. Also be aware that windy weather means pots become dry more quickly, and just because it's rained this doesn't necessarily mean pots don't need watering.

If your pots are close to your flat/house and you generally don't spend time away from home, keeping the pots well watered is not a problem. However if the containers are located some distance from home or you are going to be away during the growing season you need to think carefully about what you plant or how easy it will be to make arrangements with friends/family to water in your absence.

Plants grown in containers have different requirements than those in the ground; different soil, fertilizer, water and cultural requirements. Your choice of growing medium can affect how well the soil takes up and retains moisture. Start with good quality compost. You may have made your own or may purchase it from a community composting project such as Free Dirt based at Islington's Freightliners Farm. There are also many composts on the market designed for use in containers. Container soil mixes are composed of organic and mineral parts. The organic part may be peat moss, fir bark, redwood sawdust, shavings, pine bark, hardwood bark, or a combination of any two. The mineral part may be vermiculite, perlite, pumice, builder's sand, granite sand, or a combination of any two or three. Vermiculite, perlite, and sand are the most common minerals found in container mixes. Vermiculite is a mica material expanded under heat. Its granules retain water in air spaces. Perlite is also expanded under heat, but it retains water around the granules rather than in them, so their value in a soil mix is primarily water retention and 'lightening' of the soil through aeration. You may wish to add vermiculite, perlite or water retaining gels, especially if you are using home-made composts.

Some containers come with built-in reservoirs or you can place pots on saucers. Just be careful that plants don't become permanently waterlogged if it's a very wet period as most plants don't like this and it can lead to fungal/root decay. There are exceptions such as mint which will thrive in such conditions. Capillary matting can also be used to help plants and seedlings receive a steady supply of moisture via the roots.

Cut down on the evaporation from the top of the container using mulch such as pebbles, gravel, or wood chip, and during very sunny spells provide some shade.

## Planting containers

If using a lightweight synthetic soil mix, wet the mix before using it. It is difficult to properly wet a pot filled with dry soil mix. It's also a good idea to soak a terracotta pot in water before planting it.

Place some broken crocks or gravel at the base of pots to assist drainage and prevent soil from being washed out.

Bought plants need to be kept watered until you are ready to plant them into the container of your choice. Don't let plants dry out before getting a chance to repot them, most damage to plants occurs during the first few days after bringing them home. We've all done it!

Never pull plants directly out of containers. Ease it gently from the pot it has grown in, turning it sideways. The next step is to hold the plant over the new container at a level where it grew in the nursery container and fill soil in the container around the rootball, firming the soil around the rootball. Then water thoroughly. The rootball should be kept moist until the roots have spread into the surrounding soil.

## Choosing plants ... herbs and vegetables

With the increased popularity of vegetable growing, seeds for mini-veg suitable for growing in containers are readily available in many shops. Most seed catalogues also have a section recommending varieties for container growing and are great fun to browse. For choosing and buying organic seeds (flowers, herbs and vegetables) contact Suffolk Herbs (01376 572456; <http://suffolkherbs.com>) or The Organic Gardening Catalogue (0845 130 1304; <http://www.organiccatalog.com>). Both have good websites and on-line ordering.

Tomatoes, dwarf French beans and most herbs can be easily bought as small plants. Buying small plants will be cheaper, and they are easy to plant. Be aware of their eventual size when choosing a container. Choose herbs with ornamental value such as chives, bronze fennel or purple sage, and edible flowers. When designing your containers you can mix ready grown plants and seeds together. For example add some trailing nasturtium seeds to a hanging basket in which you have planted a tomato (tumbling variety).

## Fertilization

Remember that plants grown in containers need to be given more attention than those planted directly into the soil in garden areas. Containers provide a limited volume of soil to hold moisture and nutrients, so you must compensate by watering more frequently. However, watering frequently leaches nutrients out of the soil. Once established, feed weekly with a liquid feed such as a liquid seaweed fertilizer which you simply add into your watering can in specified amounts.

## Growing potatoes in a barrel

If you have only a small garden why not grow some spuds in a container this year? In a standard dustbin, use five seed potatoes, or use one seed potato in a 30cm flowerpot. You'll be surprised how many new potatoes you'll get, and the flavour is out of this world!

- Drill drainage holes in a standard dustbin.
- Stand the bin on bricks so water can drain away easily.
- Put 15cm of garden soil, or bought potting compost, in the base of the bin.
- Put chitted seed potatoes on the soil surface, and cover with another 15cm layer of soil.
- As the potatoes grow up, add more soil to cover the foliage. Don't worry if you bury the leaves – they'll soon grow up again.
- Stop adding soil when the level is just below the bin rim – you need to be able to water the potatoes.
- Keep the growing potatoes moist – not saturated.
- Harvest when foliage starts to die back or flowering ceases.

- If you're using ordinary garden soil, enrich it with manure or garden compost. If you have neither of these, organic chicken pellet fertiliser will do.

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SOME DWARF AND ORNAMENTAL VEGETABLES FOR CONTAINERS	
Aubergine	'Baby Belle' F1. Dwarf compact plants which are ideal for containers. Small jet black fruits; 'Baby Rosanna' F1. 60cm high. Black fruits; 'Caliope' F1. Speckled purple and cream fruits.
French bean	'Safari' Performs well and produces loads of pods.
Runner bean	'Hestia'. Dwarf variety with bi-coloured flowers looks great in containers and produces good quality beans over a long period; 'Pickwick'. Needs no support.
Chard	'Bright Lights'. Eye catching. Can be eaten as baby leaves in salads; 'Rhubarb Chard'. Another stunner. Big healthy plant for impact or can be eaten as baby leaf.
Beetroot	'Pablo' F1. Makes good baby beets.
Cabbage	'Pixie'. Small pointed cabbage for greens or later for hearted cabbage; 'Minicole' F1. Compact round cabbage ideal for small spaces; 'Redcap' F1. Deep-red, solid, mini round cabbage heads on compact plants; 'Shelta' F1. Dark green ballhead, with good flavour.
Calabrese	'Kabuki' F1. Bred for close spacing, to give a quality 'one meal' head.
Carrot	'Amsterdam 2 Maxi'. Excellent baby carrots for containers; 'Amsterdam Forcing 2'. Another one suited to baby carrots in containers.
Cauliflower	'Idol'. An early variety, suited to producing MINI cauliflowers.
Chillis	Any.
Courgette	'Bambino' F1. Heavy yields of dark green baby fruits over a long period; 'El Greco'; 'Black Forest' – the first climbing courgette!
Leeks	'Imperial Summer' F1. Early variety suitable for baby leeks in containers; 'Tornado' F1. Later variety suited to baby leeks.
Lettuce and salad leaves	Many: 'Tom Thumb', 'Green Salad Bowl', 'Red Salad Bowl', 'All Year Round', 'Marvel of Four Seasons', 'Little Gem' plus WONDERFUL mixes of saladini and oriental saladini – meek and mild, hot and spicy, Italian, French – you name it! Delicious!
Onion, spring	'Winter Over'; 'White Lisbon'.
Pea	'Half Pint'. A miniature ideal for container growing on the patio or windowsill. It needs no support.
Pepper, hot	'Apache' F1; 'Cheyenne'.
Pepper, sweet	'Redskin'; 'Mohawk'. Dwarf plant with medium sized orange fruits ideal for containers; 'Redskin'. Another miniature ideal for growing in pots or containers. Early fruiting with an excellent yield of medium size red fruits; 'Summer Salad'.
Spinach	'Matador'. Tender leaves. Can be used as spinach or as a salad leaf; 'Bloomsdale'. Old dependable variety, good in containers.
Tomato	'Tumbler'; 'Maskotka'; 'Garten Pearl'. Tumbling type ideal for hanging baskets and pots. Cherry tomatoes; 'Tumbling Tom Yellow'. Yellow fruits.
Turnip	'Atlantic'. Fast growing purple top type for baby turnips all year round in containers; 'Primera' F1 mini turnip with ping pong sized roots.
FRUIT	
Strawberries	All sorts.
Blueberries	Ideal for pots as they need very acid soil. Ideally you need two to pollinate.
Miniature trees	<p>Ballerinas – apples and pears (e.g. apple 'Gala', 'Braeburn', 'Golden Delicious' or pear 'Doyenne de Comice') trained on a single stem without side shoots on very small rootstocks. Ballerinas are somewhat delicate.</p> <p>Other dwarfs You can also buy dwarf trees especially bred for containers. Thompson and Morgan (<a href="http://fruit.thompson-morgan.com/product/dww3660">http://fruit.thompson-morgan.com/product/dww3660</a>) for example have bred some fruit trees in Canada specifically for container growing. These are apple 'Red Falstaff', nectarine 'Nectarella' and peach 'Bonanza'. They all produce full sized fruit. Also suitable for container growing are olive trees, especially in the sunny microclimate of King Henry's Walk! Figs need to have their roots controlled by being grown in a pot either on top of the soil or buried. They need the support of a sunny wall.</p>