

ANNUALS IN CONTAINERS

Paul Drobot (www.plantstogrow.com)

Container gardening is a very rapid growing facet of landscaping. Planting flowers in containers can fill some needs and solve some problems.

1. Mobility
2. Getting color where there is no soil to grow the plants such as:
 - a. Patio
 - b. Deck
 - c. Stoops
 - d. Walks
 - e. Balcony
 - f. They can be places anywhere in the yard or garden
 - g. Under trees
3. Extend the growing season
 - a. Starting the containers indoors
 - b. As cold weather hits moving the containers inside
 - c. Put the containers in protected areas
 - d. Containers near the house are usually protected from the early frosts

Containers

Since just about anything can be used as a growing container, this container should match the landscape. Some of the more common ones are:

1. Cement pots
 - a. Virtually indestructible
 - b. I have some that are over 14 years old
 - c. Instead of filling them with soil they should be "double potted"
2. Clay Pots
 - a. These are the "tried and true" growing containers
 - b. Initial cost is moderate to high depending on the style of pot. Straight-sided undecorated clay pots are cheaper than the ones with ornamental designs.
 - c. Become dirty from minerals seeping through the walls, this can be wire brushed or sanded off
 - d. To me, dirt, white mineral deposits and algae add to the charm of the pot
 - e. Easy to crack
 - f. In the winter they should be stored dry or empty to avoid cracking from the ice forming inside
 - g. I don't use clay pots over 12" since they are heavy and easy to break
3. Plastic Pots
 - a. Cheapest of the pots available
 - b. The plastic is weakened by the ultraviolet rays of the sun
 - c. Come in many styles
4. Window boxes
5. Hanging baskets
6. Production nursery containers

7. Wooden containers
8. Whiskey barrels
9. Old bathtubs ?????
10. Tires

Growing Media

Probably one of the most important aspects about successful container gardening is the growing media. There are a lot of better medias than just straight soil. There are lots of different recipes for growing medias. The following is just a list of a few that should work. These mixes should last for two to three years. The formulas are in parts (volume) such as 2 pails of soil 1 pail of peat moss.

2-3 soil....1-2 peat moss1/2-1 perlite
 3 soil....2 peat moss....1 perlite....1 vermiculite
 3 peat moss....1 perlite.... 1 vermiculite

- a. Just about any type of organic matter can be substituted for the peat moss
- b. A fertilizer can be added to the mix
- c. If possible a water-absorbing polymer can be added to the mix. This is expensive but well worth the money

The media can be kept in the same container for 2-3 years and reused. It can also be dumped on a sheet of weed barrier or just on the ground and used next year.

Upkeep

1. Watering is one of the most important aspects to keeping the containers in good shape. They should never be allowed to dry out. If a good structured mix is used it will be very difficult to over water. Remember that the containers are exposed to the sun from the sides. They will heat up and dry out rapidly.
2. A fertilizer should be added to the mix or top dressed after the container is finished. Liquid fertilizer can be used at recommended rates. Pots should be fertilized once a week using a liquid fertilizer.
3. There should be constant
 - a. deadheading
 - b. pruning
 - c. weeding
4. Stake if necessary

Design

A container can be a mono-scheme or a mixture of different plants and colors. Plants listed with a “*” are grown for their foliage. A good combination in a container would be:

1. Plants draping over the sides like
 Cascading Petunias
 Alyssum
 Lobelia

Ivy Leaf Geraniums
 Vinca*
 Licorice Vine (gray and gold colored)*
 Creeping Jenny*
 Lysimachia
 English and German Ivy*
 Variegated Swedish Ivy*
 Asparagus Fern Sprengeri
 Sweet Potato plants*
 Lotus Vine*
 Iresine "Purple Lady"*
 Periwinkle "Mediterranean Series"
 Lantana

2. Some spiked or upright plants
 - Salvia (Fire Cracker types)
 - Salvia (Victoria and Silvery White types)
 - Spikes*
 - Celosia
 - Nicotianna
 - Snap Dragons
 - Iresine*
 - Some ornamental grass*
 - Etc.

3. Some filler or mass plants
 - Geraniums
 - Marigolds
 - Ageratum
 - Dusty Miller*
 - Petunias
 - Impatiens
 - Asparagus Fern*
 - Etc.

To get added height to the center plants the bottom of a pot can be cut off and put in the center of the large container. Then a plant can be planted in this pot giving it added height.

Odds and Ends

1. Hanging baskets are difficult to grow
 - a. They are usually smaller containers
 - b. Get baked in the sun
 - c. Are out of reach and hard to maintain
 - d. Get over grown quickly
 - e. Wind whip
2. To help maintain the greenhouse grown look of the basket
 - a. Have a good media structure

- b. Water daily if needed
- c. Maybe provide some shade during the heat of the day
- d. Use a liquid fertilizer weekly
- e. Constant deadheading and pruning
- f. Use a pulley system to lower and raise the basket

More Odds and Ends

1. If there are no drain holes in the pot a layer of crockage - drain material - must be added to the bottom of the pot
 - a. If the pot is heavy use Styrofoam
 - b. If the pot is light use rocks to add weight
 - c. It should be 2-3 inches or more in depth
2. The larger the pots, the slower it will dry out
3. Group different size pots together
4. Move the pots around
5. A new item being sold is called pot feet. These are pieces of decorative ceramic, cement, or plastic etc. that are put under the pot to elevate it off the ground. This prevents creepy crawlers from entering the pot.
6. Double potting
 - a. This is a good way to keep more expensive looking clean
 - b. It consists of using a production pot as the growing pot and setting it inside of the good, decorative pot.
 - b. Gives the ability to easily change the plants that are in the pot throughout the growing season

Cost

Container gardening can be an expensive undertaking. The most expensive item can be the container. Since this should last years, this cost is spread out. The growing media is another initial expense, but again this can be reused a few years and then recycled into the garden. The plants are usually an annual expense, since most of us don't try to over winter the plants from the containers.

Comparing the cost of a container garden that you made up, to one that can be purchased at the garden centers, will make your efforts well worthwhile. The main drawback to making up your own container garden is that they are initially smaller and may take a few weeks to catch up.

