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Plants for Pots: Container Gardening Guide

Planting in pots lets you surround yourself with flowers on decks and patios.



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— *Bill Calkins, Ball Horticultural Co.'s independent garden center business manager*

Whether you live in an apartment with only a small deck or you want to add color to the patio of a larger home, growing and maintaining plants in pots offers a way to brighten your immediate outdoor surroundings. And growing flowers, vegetables, herbs or other plants in containers is so simple that even the most novice of gardeners may do it. For experts, the possibilities are endless when it comes to design and the types of plants you may grow in pots.

"(Container gardening) is a great way of bringing color into your home by putting your own stamp on your property," Cutrone said. The design possibilities with container gardening are endless because the pots can be designed and then placed in aesthetically pleasing places. Container gardening also allows those living in apartments or condominiums to bring some green into their homes without taking up too much space.

It's also easier to manage plants in pots than in a flower bed because the gardener controls every aspect of the soil. "You know everything that is going into the bottom of the pot, so you actually know that you're starting with a really good base," said Bill Calkins, independent garden center business manager at Chicago-based Ball Horticultural Co., a producer and wholesale distributor of horticultural products.

If you're new to container gardening, where do you start?

"There are definitely some plants that I would call bulletproof," Calkins said. He suggested dragon wing begonias because they like sun or shade and they get big really fast, so "you look like a pro no matter what." He also recommended petunias and calibrachoa. Most container gardeners focus on annuals, but perennials also may be used and provide an unusual aspect to the pot.

Where to Get Plants

While it is more common to transfer from container to garden, there's no reason you can't take a plant from a garden and move it to a pot.

Bill Calkins, business manager for Ball Horticultural Co., emphasized that you should prune any dead leaves off a plant that you intend to move into a pot. Focus on getting as much of the roots as possible and doing as little damage to the roots as possible.

The easiest way to start your container garden, however, is from cell packs. You won't have to deal with the spacing of the seeds, a task with which many beginning gardeners struggle. And cell packs can be had for little money, so they are an easy and cheap option.

For care of new plants, always follow the directions on the packaging with regard to watering and sun exposure.

Edibles, which include fruits, vegetables and herbs, bring beginners satisfaction right from the start. As Annette Pelliccio, founder of the Happy Gardener, a national organic gardening company, pointed out, the rewards of growing edibles often encourage new gardeners to continue year after year.

"For beginners, it's great to grow things that are going to give you a plentiful harvest," explained Pelliccio, whose company is based in Ashland, Virginia. "That way they're excited about it the first season, and they'll have more confidence for the next year." Pelliccio suggested basil, cilantro, parsley, chives and sage as especially good options for a container herb garden.

Watering, she stressed, is the most challenging aspect of container gardening, but she noted that plenty of tools are available to help beginners determine how much water their plants need. It's easy for inexperienced gardeners to both underwater and overwater container plants.

Pelliccio warned that the clay in a terra-cotta pot absorbs water. She suggested lining the inside of the pot with a light layer of Vaseline before adding the soil.

An easy way to drown a plant is by using a container with no drainage. "Plants need to breathe, and their roots need to breathe, so if water pools up in the root system of a plant, they just rot," Calkins said. He also suggested putting in pieces of plastic or other material in the bottom of the pot to create some extra space for drainage.

Calkins said that you'll only need a few basic tools for container gardening. Among trowels, a narrower one works best for pots because it will keep dirt from spilling over, and you should have a quality pair of garden gloves.

For fertilizer, Calkins recommends a slow-release formula that may be put right on top of the soil.

Once you have planted your container, you need to decide where to put it. This decision is a combination of function and fashion.

First, consider the light needs of your plant. Some require much more sun than others, while some can tolerate almost no sun. Light requirements are usually found on identifying tags when you buy plants at the nursery. If your plant does not have one, any garden book or gardening website will tell you how much sun your plant needs to flourish.

"This is kind of fun because I'm going to advocate that you spend a day sitting in your backyard watching the sun," Calkins said. You must watch how much sun hits certain areas of your yard so you'll know where to put your containers so they get the kind of light they need.

Now you can turn to the design elements. You may make a mini-garden in a pot by combining several plants that share the same light and watering needs and are complementary to one another, or you may make the pot into a huge profusion of just one plant, which gives you a massed effect.

Cutrone, the nurseryman, said he asks many questions of the buyers who come into Hicks Nurseries. You should have a basic idea of what color or color scheme you're looking for, and where it's going in your outdoor area.

"I always ask what's beyond that plant," Cutrone said. "If you put a red plant in front of a red wall, it disappears."

Experts agree that the options with container gardening are endless. From flowers to fruits and vegetables, you may create wonderful gardens for in and around your home.

Calkins emphasized that you should challenge yourself with new combinations, especially with edibles. "It can be as simple as picking a good compact tomato variety, some jalapeño and some cilantro, and putting that in a pot, and you instantly have a salsa garden."