

Terrariums had their start with Dr. Nathaniel Ward in London in the 1800s. In his experiments with growing plants indoors, Ward found they grew well in closed containers. His discovery led to the craze for "Wardian cases," as terrariums were then called. Bell jars were the commonly used containers, but now almost any glass container is fair game for creating miniature landscapes and mossy woodlands; a dish garden is even simpler.

Glass containers are the best choices for terrariums. Clear plastic ones can also be used, but they tend to discolor in time. To start, clean the container and dry it thoroughly inside and out.

Packaged soils especially for terrariums are available, or use any standard packaged soil mixed with additional sand for better drainage. Use only sterilized materials.

Put a layer of small stones, gravel, or coarse sand in the bottom of the container. Sprinkle a quarter-inch layer of charcoal pieces over it to help keep the soil sweet. Add from one to four inches of soil to hold the plants. Moisten the soil before planting.

Landscaping

While the plants are still in their pots, determine how they should be placed in the container. Arrange and rearrange them on a counter top as you visualize them in the container. Give the miniature garden perspective by adding at least one plant that is taller than the others. Variegated leaved plants also add interest.

Start planting from the center and work your way out; or start in one corner and work to the opposite corner. Make a hole in the soil for the first plant. Knock it out of its pot, shake off the excess soil, and set it into the hole. Mound soil around the roots and tamp it down firmly. Keep the leaves of the plant above the soil as much as possible. Continue with the rest of the plants. Before watering use a small sable brush to remove soil clinging to the sides of the container. Brush soil off leaves and stems of plants. Add decorative stones, driftwood, gravel, bark, or ceramic animals for interest, if desired. (Or position them as you set in the plants.)

Water and light

Water the plants lightly. Use a poultry baster for hard-to-get-at plants in a bottle. Give plants in a closed terrarium or small-necked bottle about a tablespoon of water. Plants in open terrariums or dish gardens will need more.

Set your newly planted terrarium in medium light for a week. Then move the terrarium into bright, indirect light--not full sun. Move it into full sun if it's a succulent dish garden, with plants such as miniature jades, sedums, and echeveria.

Water terrariums when the soil is dry. This will probably be every month or two for covered terrariums. Open ones should be checked every week or so. Succulent dish gardens should be watered as often as any normal potted succulent.

Tops for terrariums

Aucuba

Baby's tears

Begonia
Chinese evergreen
Creeping fig
Dracena
English ivy
Fern
Fittonia
Gesneriad
Grape ivy
Maranta
Peperomia
Philodendron
Pickaback plant
Pilea
Polka-dot plant
Purple velvet plant
Strawberry saxifrage