



Healthy Garden Workshop Series

Container Gardening and Window Boxes July 17, 2009

Choose the right container

Look for containers that fit the space you have. And keep in mind that the plants growing in them will ultimately be much taller and wider than the container. Large containers hold more soil, therefore more water and nutrients for your plants. Tall containers provide better drainage than short containers because the capillary action of the soil will help drain away excess water. Terra cotta and earthenware are useful for top heavy plants because they are less likely to tip. Plastic is a good alternative if you need to move the planted container very far. Be sure that your container has a drainage hole in the bottom.

Use the right soil

There are many different types of potting soil available for use in container gardens. Choose one that is light and fluffy and capable of holding a lot of water. Garden soil can be used, but should be mixed with leaf mold, coir fiber, or other ingredients to create more pore space in the soil. Pasteurize it by heating it to 160°F for several hours before mixing other ingredients into it to kill any disease spores or weed seeds that might be in it. Place a small piece of window screen over the drainage hole to keep the soil from washing out, and fill the container to the rim with prepared soil.

Keep the season in mind when selecting plants

Spring vegetables and flowers won't grow well in summer heat, and heat-loving plants will languish until night temperatures are warm. Change your container garden plantings in late spring and early autumn to take advantage of seasonal changes in weather. If you are growing herbs, you might plant some basil in late spring, harvest it in late September and plant some parsley and dill. The basil will grow well in summer heat, and the parsley and dill will grow well in cool weather. If you are growing vegetables, choose varieties bred specifically for containers. Pansies can be grown in containers throughout the winter and can be replaced with heat tolerant annuals in late spring. You can even grow dwarf conifers, carnivorous swamp plants, and perennials in containers. Choose hardy perennials and shrubs if you want to keep them outdoors in the winter. Because the soil is exposed to the extremes of the air temperatures, plants growing in containers must be able to tolerate more extreme temperatures than they would have to if they were growing in the ground of your garden.

Water and fertilize frequently

Container gardens have a very restricted soil volume. Moisture and nutrients must always be available for best plant growth. Most containers need to be watered daily when plants are mature if rain fails to do the job for you. Water thoroughly, at least until some water comes out of the drainage hole. Fertilize plants at least once a month. Liquid fertilizers are best, because they can replace quickly nutrients lost from the soil during a prolonged rainfall or rapid growth, or you can use timed-release fertilizer to provide a low level of nutrients every time you water.

Don't waste your effort on sick plants

As the seasons change, changes in temperature will cause some plants to fail. Don't be afraid to remove plants that are no longer yielding a crop and flowers that have waned. The cost of new plants is small, and it might be best to remove plants that have been heavily damaged by pests and diseases rather than trying to nurse them back to health.

Protect your containers in winter

Some gardeners only grow plants in their containers in spring, summer, and fall. It's important to move containers to a location where they are protected from freezing and thawing during the winter to keep them in good condition. The soil can be kept in the container and can be reused in most instances. Discard the soil and use fresh soil if root diseases have been a problem. If you want to keep your container garden looking good throughout the winter, choose wood, fiberglass, or heavy duty plastic containers. If possible, move containers to a location near a wall where there is some protection from extreme winter temperatures. You can pile leaves or straw around containers or insulate the soil. Check the moisture in the soil periodically and water dry containers if temperatures are going to be above freezing for several hours.

Enjoy your container garden

Place containers on an empty upside down pot, a cinder block, or blocks of wood to bring them into easy reach. Plant a container herb garden near your outdoor grill or kitchen so you can harvest herbs quickly and easily. Put containers where they can be seen from windows in your home so you can enjoy them even when you are indoors. Get the kids involved by growing a few strawberries or planting a few bean seeds in a container they can tend themselves. If you're a cat lover, grow your own catnip in a container.

Some Plants that do well in containers

Vegetables

Tomatoes
Eggplant
Lettuce
Spinach
Bush Green Beans
Chard
Arugula
Peppers

Shrubs

Dwarf Hinoki Falsecypress
Creeping Juniper
Red Twig Dogwood
Dwarf Alberta Spruce

Herbs

Basil
Thyme
Rosemary
Parsley
Sage
Chives

Flowers

Petunia
Begonia
Marigold
Angelonia
Coleus
Geranium

More information

www.usda.gov/peoplesgarden

twitter.com/peoplesgarden

Next Healthy Garden Workshop – July 24

Weeding and Removing Invasive Plants: Are pesky weeds blocking the sunlight from your garden plants? Is your yard being taken over by invasive species? Do you pull weeds that keep coming back? Learn strategies to effectively manage the weeds and other invasive plants in your garden and yard so you can grow what you want, while keeping out what you don't.



United States Department of Agriculture