

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener  
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Contact: WSU/Skagit County Extension: 428-4270

Gardening in containers offers the opportunity to showcase beautiful and unusual plants, highlight areas, and brighten up doorways, patios and gardens. Container and plant choices are limited only by imagination and ingenuity along with a healthy respect of what species grow well together. Depending on container size, plants can range from tiny to very large. After choosing containers and appropriate plants, care is needed for soil preparation, planting, watering and fertilizing.

It is easy to purchase packaged potting mixes. There are several choices available. Your local nursery can help choose what is best. Some people prefer to mix their own potting soil. There are many formulas to use, but they all combine organic material and mineral matter mixed in proportions that assure good drainage along with moisture retention. Whether using a mix or preparing your own soil, mix in a slow-release plant food or plan to use a liquid fertilizer. Whichever you choose follow directions on the label. Generally, slow release plant food granules can last up to six months. Liquid fertilizer is usually applied every six weeks.

Containers are made of numerous kinds of materials. It is not unusual to see novelty containers such as old shoes, baskets and wash tubs. Unglazed pottery allows water and air to pass through the container walls causing the pot to dry out more quickly. Glazed pottery is not porous and does not dry out as fast. Ceramic pottery does not deteriorate with time, but breaks easily. Soak new porous pots before planting so they don't draw water out of the soil. Plastic containers are light, inexpensive and do not build up salt accumulation on the sides, although they become brittle after a couple of years in the sun. One of the many joys of container gardening is picking containers that suit the plants and delight the owner.

Make sure the container has enough holes for good drainage. Good drainage helps keep the plant roots oxygenated and excess salts from building up.

After you have chosen a container and plants, partially fill the container with soil that is moist, but not soaking wet. With the plants still in their original pots, make an arrangement that is pleasing. After you are satisfied, gently remove the plants from their original containers. Carefully remove excess soil from the roots. Spread the roots out if they are bunched up or have circled in the original container. Roots can be trimmed if needed. Fill in around the plants with additional soil, gently tap down the soil and water thoroughly. More soil might need to be added if watering compacts the soil in the container.

There are so many delightful ways to fill containers. Put a couple of inches of soil in a pot, add tulip, daffodil or hyacinth bulbs or a combination; cover the bulbs completely with soil; add a layer of muscari grape hyacinth; add more soil; finish off with sphagnum peat moss on top. Tulips and daffodils with an over planting of pansy or viola is a cheerful way to welcome spring. Plant the bulbs close together to get a full show of color in the spring. A strawberry jar could be planted with a small non-invasive ivy, fibrous begonia and geranium with a dracaena in the top space. Flowers such as petunias, verbena and ivy geraniums can trail out of containers. Planting an azalea and surrounding it with needlepoint ivy makes a pleasing combination. Ornamental grasses, perennials, and annuals can thrive in containers singularly and in combination. A larger container could hold purple fountain grass, coneflowers, scabiosa and a trailing plant such as lobelia. Coleus, elephant's ear (*Tradescantia pallida* 'Purpurea') and oxalis are good combinations for partly sunny areas. When properly cared for by watering, fertilizing and pruning, perennial containers can last for years. If a plant grows too large or you tire of a combination, the plant can be transferred into the ground or given away and a new combination planted.

Container gardening is an easy way to bring color, drama or whimsy into an area. Pots can be used for a singular dramatic statement or placed in a cluster of shapes and sizes. Gardening books and magazines offer a myriad of suggestions for container plants. It is a perfect way to make the most of small spaces and add points of interest to the landscape.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.