

Container Gardening

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A chance to be creative

The beauty of planting in pots is multi-fold. Containers can provide those living with limited space a place to grow flowers, herbs and vegetables, small trees and shrubs; close-up views of seasonal displays; color accents and structure in the landscape or on a terrace; a way to break up a wall, mark an entrance or create a focal accent; an ideal spot for frost-sensitive plants or those requiring special conditions to thrive; a space to confine invasive plants so they can't spread throughout the garden; and a creative platform to experiment with companion plantings and groupings.

Your first consideration is deciding where you are going to place your container and choose plants which will thrive in those conditions. Will the area be exposed to full sun, part sun, light shade or full shade? Is the space challenged by winds, heat, cold or rain? Hanging baskets can be particularly vulnerable to drying out in exposed situations. Is there a water source nearby for easy access?

Once your site has been determined, think about the container you will choose to fit the space. Using materials and architectural details from your home may aid you in choosing your style and colors. As a guideline, a pot of at least 12" works well for flowering annuals and perennials. Smaller pots tend to look lost unless you are using them as single plant accents in your overall display. They dry out quickly and can limit root space. Larger pots are good for shrubs, small trees and combination plantings.

Technically, a container is anything that holds soil in which a plant is set so options are limitless. The most common types are clay (inexpensive but dry out quickly), terracotta (more costly but typically last longer), glazed ceramic (beautiful color options but may chip or break), plastic (inexpensive but can become brittle over time), wood (will ultimately rot) and tin (rusts eventually). All containers require an unimpeded drainage hole or holes.

Now, here comes the fun part: picking the plants. Determine if your pot will contain a single planting or a group. Will you make a vignette of multiple containers? Think about the impact of colors you wish to work with. This part is very subjective. For high contrast punch, use colors opposite from each other on the color wheel, e.g. blue and orange. If you are seeking a harmonious combination, consider analogous colors (three colors next to each other on the color wheel). Be as adventurous as you please as you create but try not to allow your design to become a hodgepodge of plantings. And remember to place plants with similar growing requirements together.



Top Left: Choosing containers to add architectural details can provide interest in the garden. **Top Right:** The right container can add interest to a space. *Photos by Nancy Crowell/WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

One common technique for designing containers is the “thriller, filler and spiller” concept. Thrillers add height and create drama and vertical elements to your composition. They are generally tall, upright plants with an outstanding feature, such as an interesting shape, outstanding color or dramatic flower. Thrillers can be foliage or flowering plants and generally are placed in the center or back of the grouping. Because they will be taking center stage in your composition, you may want to select them first and build your design around them.

Filler plants are chosen to flesh out and incorporate texture and color into the arrangement while complementing, but not overshadowing, the main plant. These plants generally have a more rounded silhouette to add mass. Using more than one filler can add extra interest. Fillers help hide the bare stems and stalks of your main attraction. If your thriller is spikey, perhaps rounded leaves in the filler would be appropriate. If using a large-leafed thriller, fine textured fillers add contrast.

Spiller plants anchor the pot and spill over the edge for a softening affect and visually root the container to the ground. Spillers can also be wound up and through the filler and thriller for a whimsical arrangement.

Keep scale in mind with these three elements so your design has balance as well as interest. It is fun to visit your local nursery and visually “audition” your selections together before you buy to help find combinations with the most harmony or pizzazz.

Now you are ready to plant. Begin by screening your drainage holes with mesh to keep soil contained and allow water to flow through. Use potting or planter mix because these are coarse-textured enough to supply good drainage. You can add 3–4 month slow-release fertilizer into the mix before you plant, then apply a water-soluble fertilizer every 2–3 weeks, as needed, later in the season. Do not use garden soil, as your plant roots will be too confined and not get sufficient air to thrive. It may also bring disease, insects and weed seeds into your pots.

During the growing season, check soil for dryness regularly and water thoroughly. Even if it has rained, test the soil because often leaves can shield rain from the plant surface. Protect containers from excessive heat and winter freezing. Groom and deadhead your plants to promote bushy growth and encourage more flowering. Make replacements as the season progresses, if necessary. If using trees or shrubs in a container, repot every 2-3 years to allow room for new roots. Either cut away several inches of the root ball or select a larger pot and fill with fresh potting mix.

Containers are a wonderful way to add your own creative touch to your patio or landscape. Remember, aesthetics is a matter of personal preference. Enjoy the journey!

RESOURCES:

- “Container Planting”, from 10-Minute University, Oregon Master Gardener Association – Clackamas County Chapter in Cooperation with Oregon State University Extension Service.
<https://extension.oregonstate.edu/sites/default/files/documents/12281/containerplanting.pdf>
- “The Art of Container Gardening”, Penn State University Extension, August 8, 2017.
www.extension.psu.edu/the-art-of-container-gardening
- “Thrillers, Fillers & Spillers”, Steve Silk, Fine Gardening issue 97.
www.finegardening.com/thrillers-fillers-spillers
- Container Gardening for Washington and Oregon, Marianne Binetti and Don Williamson with Alison Beck and Laura Peters, Lone Pine Publishing International, 2008
- Pots in the Garden: Expert design and planting techniques, Ray Rogers, Timber Press, 2007.
- “How to Create a Container Planting”, Garden Design Magazine
www.gardendesign.com/containers/how-to.html
- “9 Tips for Creating an Artful Container Garden”, Christine Tusher, Houzz , May 9, 2014.
www.houzz.com/ideabooks/26867745/list/9-Tips-for-Creating-an-Artful-Container-Garden
- “Container Gardening Basics: Dirt on Soil”, Kim Gamel, Houzz, July 25, 2013.
www.houzz.com/ideabooks/14812173/list/container-gardening-basics-the-dirt-on-soil

Note: some hyperlinks in this article have been updated since its initial publication.