

After You Buy Your Plant

By Karen Stephens
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Caring for your new plants in pots and raised beds

Bringing new plants home for your garden may spark memories of driving home with a new puppy who is behaving strangely. Fortunately, new plants make easier additions to the family since advice abounds for the home gardener.

When you purchase plants from the Master Gardener Plant Fair on May 7, you'll be greeted by master gardeners waiting to answer your questions. But if you don't have time to chat, here are some ideas to help you weather those first weeks of plant adoption.

Since gardeners are expressing increasing interest in containers and raised beds, we will focus on these strategies, though most suggestions are also appropriate for traditional plot gardening.

Hardening off your plants prepares them for the real world of hot sun, rough winds and variable rain. Because most perennials in our climate have already been hardened outdoors or in unheated greenhouses, they are ready for planting. In contrast, veggie starts, tomato plants and annual herbs and flowers have probably never left their heated greenhouses.

Start the hardening process by reducing water to one light drink a day. Then treat them to two days each of the following three steps:

1. Move plants to a covered outdoor area during the day, but bring them in or cover them at night.
2. Leave plants outside, removing covers in the day and replacing them at night.
3. Remove covers altogether.

Tropical and semi-tropical plants such as tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, basil and cilantro should remain at step 2 until night temperatures are 50-55 °F. In fact, some gardeners grow these heat lovers under plastic tunnels for much or all of the season.

Containers or Raised Beds? Both arrangements offer advantages to gardeners with poor native soil, limited space or bad backs! But because each option has unique features, you may want to experiment with both to test their advantages.

In his pamphlet, *Vegetable Gardening in Containers*, Texas A & M Extension Horticulturist, Joseph Masabni, PhD, writes that **container gardening** avoids problems with soil borne diseases or poor soil conditions. He states that most vegetables that grow in a typical backyard garden will also do well in containers.



Raised beds are a popular and easy way to grow vegetables and herbs. *Photo by Tonya Kruger/WSU Skagit County Master Gardener Intern.*

Portability is also an asset, allowing gardeners to place or hang pots wherever conditions are most suitable. Another consideration is the ease and speed with which containers can be prepared. And you can now choose affordable, light-weight fiberglass and polypropylene pots attractively designed to simulate natural materials.

Gardening in **raised beds** allows you to incorporate native soil into the planting area and build its fertility cumulatively over time. (In contrast, container potting soil is changed out each season.) Plus building raised beds is not overly time-consuming or costly since they need not be framed.

WSU Vegetable Extension Specialist, Dr. Carol Miles describes the construction of an unframed bed:

- Remove all grass and weeds from the bed site.
- Place a layer of compost 4-6" deep on the ground covering the bed site.
- Remove the topsoil from the surrounding four sides of the bed and place on top of the compost.
- Top off the bed with 2" of compost before planting.
- Reshape unframed beds each year by raking any soil and compost that may have slipped onto the walkway back onto the bed.

You can meet the varied requirements of your plants easily in containers and raised beds.

For ease in plant care and efficient use of resources, group plants with similar needs in categories such as soil pH, nutrients, water, sunlight and depth of soil. You can then create appropriate environments such as deep (12") raised beds for tomatoes and root crops or acidic soils for blueberries.

You can also identify ideal light conditions for your plant groups. Perennials vary widely in light requirements from deep shade to part-shade to full-sun. Vegetables, herbs and annual flowers prefer *at least* 6 hours of direct sun each day. Plant sun-lovers in raised beds located in full sun or containers placed in sunny locations such as an edge of a driveway!



Finally, your plants will thank you for matching them with the right-sized pots: a single tomato plant needs a 5 gallon pot whereas three parsley plants can live comfortably in a 1 gallon container.

Whatever planting strategy you use, find great values at the Plant Fair on May 7 where you can ask any further questions you might have about container and raised bed gardening.

Karen Stephens is a Washington State University/Skagit County Master Gardener. Questions may be submitted to the WSU Extension Office, 11768 Westar Lane, Suite A, Burlington, WA 98233. 360-428-4270 or skagit.wsu.edu/MG.

RESOURCES:

- Cogger, C., *Raised Beds: Deciding if They Benefit Your Vegetable Garden*. WSU Ext. Publication FS075E. <https://pubs.extension.wsu.edu/raised-beds-deciding-if-they-benefit-your-vegetable-garden-home-garden-series>
- Masabni, J., *Vegetable Gardening in Containers*. Texas A & M AgriLife Extension Download publication E-545 for free at: <https://agrilifebookstore.org>.
- Miles, Carol et al., *Home Vegetable Gardening in Washington*. WSU Ext. Publication EM057E. <https://s3.wp.wsu.edu/uploads/sites/2071/2014/04/Home-Vegetable-Gardening-in-WA-EM057E.pdf>

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