

Container Gardening

Part II

by Claudia Steen

This article will continue with tips of how to successfully do Container Gardening and includes:

Fertilizing: High-performance plants need nutrients to produce vigorous foliage, bright blooms, and vegetables or fruit. Gradual-release plant food, blended into a potting mix before planting, offers an easy way to feed container plants continuously. The coated granules release nutrients slowly usually over three to nine months, depending on the product. If your potting mix does not already include fertilizer, add gradual-release fertilizer according to package directions.

Additional granules can be scratched into the soil mix later as nutritional boost, if needed. Water soluble plant food is an alternative. Make a solution of plant food and water, sprinkle it on the soil, and reapply it regularly throughout the growing season. The plant food label indicates – in a series of numbers separated by dashes – the balance of the major nutrients it supplies nitrogen-phosphorous-potassium. An all-purpose, 14-14-14 fertilizer gives plants the primary nutrients they need to thrive. Some plants need feeding more often, including those in close quarters or in a soilless mix, as well as vigorous growers. Edible plants and long-term plantings benefit from organic fertilizers that enrich soil and improve its structure. Organic fertilizers include compost, rotted manure, fish emulsion, and kelp products. Plants show signs of nutrient deficiency

particularly in their foliage, alerting you to their need for fertilizer. Clues include pale or discolored leaves, weak or slow growth, and smaller leaves and flowers. Taper off plant food as the end of the gardening season approaches.



Mulching: Mulch is a funny word, but the stuff has a serious job. As it covers the surface of the potting mix in your container gardens, the layer of loose material works primarily to conserve soil moisture. Mulching benefits your garden and you in more ways as well. Mulch prevents soil from washing out of pots and splashing on foliage when you water plants. Mulch also insulates soil and plant roots, helping them keep cooler during the hottest days of summer. Organic mulches, such as cocoa shells and chipped or shredded bark, decompose gradually and add to the soil mix. Ornamental mulches, including pebbles, shells, and

recycled glass, are effective mulching materials as well as pretty. Mulch deters squirrels, slugs, and other critters from pestering container plantings. Squirrels won't bother digging in gravel or medium- to large-bark mulch. Slugs will avoid any gritty mulch. In spring, after rain or watering, top the soil with a 1- to 2-inch layer of mulch. Apply it loosely and evenly; avoid compacting mulch and piling it up around plant stems. Take advantage of the ornamental value that comes with many mulches. Crushed recycled glass, polished river stones, marbles, and flat

glass drops come in a multitude of colors. They glisten when wet and reflect sunlight. Terra-cotta spheres and seashells are especially eye-catching. Mix and match plants and mulches to find the most effective and pleasing combinations. For example, organic nutshells and fragrant cocoa shells work especially well in edible gardens; herbs and alpines have a proclivity for fine gravel.

Grooming: It takes just a few minutes a day to keep container gardens healthy and vigorous. Combining grooming and watering in a routine also gives you an opportunity to spot any disease or pest problems early. Follow these steps to accomplish basic maintenance of your plants.

Deadheading – Remove flowers as soon as they begin to shrivel, fade, or otherwise appear spent. Use your fingers or pruners to pinch off spent flowers. This also helps prevent annuals from completing their life cycle and producing seeds. While you're at it, remove any discolored or damaged foliage.

Pruning – Snip back fast-growing or untidy plants show signs of unruliness or unattractive bare stems. Trim a plant for a better shape in graceful proportion to the container and any planting companions. Prevent annuals from becoming scraggly or overgrown by midsummer, trimming 1 to 2 inches from them every other week. If plants become scraggly and bloom less, cut them back by one-third to one-half; then fertilize the plants and watch them rebound quickly.

Replanting – By late summer or early fall, when some plants have passed their peak and appear bedraggled, it is time to replace them. Use a hand trowel to carefully lift a declining plant from the container and replace it with a new one. Long-term plantings need rejuvenating too. After two or three years, remove the tree, shrub, or perennial from the pot. Trim as much as one-third of the larger roots, especially those circling the root ball or tangled in tight masses. Loosen the root ball. Replant in a pot at least 2 inches larger with fresh potting mix.



Pot Holders: Giving your container garden a life – literally raising it off the ground – has practical advantages. First, good drainage is crucial. If excess water cannot escape from a container or becomes trapped under it, plant roots will suffocate, die, and rot. Second, if your container sits on a deck, balcony, or comparable surface, drainage may be impeded, and the surface might be stained or damaged by moisture. Pot feet add to the decorative charm of a container garden. Elevating a pot using pot feet raises it enough to facilitate drainage. Using pot feet also allows air circulation under the pot and prevents staining of the surface beneath. Placing a saucer under a pot catches excess water and helps prevent surface staining too. Pour excess water out of a saucer – only some water garden plants benefit from standing with their roots submerged. If a pot lacks a drainage hole and drilling one isn't an option, use it as a cachepot – decorate holder – instead. Set a planted pot in it, elevating the inner pot with a 2-inch layer of gravel, pot shards, or styrene packing materials to allow drainage. Empty any excess water occasionally. Or get creative with the container you choose for example use an old boot.

Part III will discuss more tips for container gardening. And if you have gardening questions feel free to call 509-574-1604 or email gardener@co.yakima.wa.us and ask a Master Gardener.