



Healthy Garden Tips

SMALL SPACE AND CONTAINER MAINTENANCE

By Denise Levine, UCCE Master Gardener

Containers, window boxes and hanging baskets have special needs that are well worth paying attention to when we see the wonderful opportunities that container gardens afford us. Container maintenance consists of: Watering, Pruning and Transplanting, and Feeding.

WATERING

Window boxes, containers and small raised beds have special watering needs and are completely dependent on you. If window boxes or containers are located under eaves, even watering during the rainy season may be necessary. Additionally, often the reflection of the sun and heat from walls and decks make watching the water needs of your plants very important. These plants may need to be watered twice a day in the warmest weather.

Usually, containers are watered with a soft flow of water until the soil is saturated and excess water runs out the bottom drainage holes. It often works best to lightly water each plant in some general order that leaves no plant out, and then repeat the watering a second time. This gives the surface of the soil a few minutes to soften and makes the water percolation through the soil a little easier. Occasionally, when we follow these directions, water runs out the bottom but the plant is not thriving...often this happens after a hot spell or period of neglect and can mean that the soil mass has dried and contracted, and all the water is draining around it, but not through it. If this has happened to a plant, sit the pot in a container of water until the soil is spongy again. Sometimes loosening the soil around the edges of the pot with a chopstick or fork can help break the crust of soil that results when the surface is too dry.

In order to know how much water your plants need, pay attention to your plants every day. If your finger feels the soil is dry 1 inch from the surface, it is time to water. Remember, it is better to water gently several times as you perhaps walk around your deck or along your hanging baskets, then try to water your plant all in one try. If you have become well acquainted with your plants water needs, some gardeners have been successful with small drip systems on a timer.

PINCHING, PRUNING AND TRANSPLANTING

Unlike a garden grown plant, a container grown plant must be kept within its bounds. Often this requires pinching or pruning. In the case of a hanging basket of impatiens or mixed basil, pinching back the foliage and dead heading any dead flowers on the impatiens and *any* flowers on the basil, would not only keep the plants producing but would also create bushy full plants to fill in your containers. In the case of a woodier plant, get out your pruning shears or clippers to trim your plant back to a healthy shape.

If pruning is not enough to keep your plants or container garden within its bounds, it may be time to replant. Remember, that when you move a plant from one pot to another, you want a pot that is bigger, but not TOO big. Usually one to two inches larger is enough. Make sure you have more potting soil and if your plant has a large root system, you might need your clippers. Holding your hand over the face of the plant, take the plant from its container. Examine the roots for signs of rot or disease. If the plant is root bound or has excessive roots, and you would like to keep it in the same container, take your clean shears or a sharp knife and cut the roots back by one to two inches on all sides. Then replant in the same container with fresh soil mix. If the plant's root ball appears compacted, cut it vertically with a sharp knife to encourage roots to move out into the new soil. HINT: When planting several plants in a container, window box or hanging basket, place the thirstier plants toward the back and middle of the boxes where the soil stays moist longer.

FERTILIZING

Because containers need to be watered so often, it is important that we replace the nutrients that leach out. Avoid over fertilization which can result in excess salts. Excess salts can be eliminated by drenching with distilled or rain water.

There are several ways to fertilize and it could depend on how you prefer to water. If you enjoy using a watering can, you can use a dilute fertilizer in your watering can. If you prefer, you can also use a dry granular fertilizer. Whatever type of nutrient you use, remember to read the labels and follow the directions exactly. This is NOT a case where "If a little is good a lot more is better!"

DISEASES AND PESTS

Many gardeners find that their daily watering session is the time to check to see if plants are healthy. Shiny leafed plants often appreciate a rinse and all plants appreciate being looked after. Be sure to lift the leaves and look underneath where pests can be lurking. If you don't see any cause for the damage you notice, get out your magnifying glass or bring a plant sample into the Master Gardener office for help. If you have something contagious, GET RID OF THE PLANT. If you are plagued by disease or spores, bleach your containers before you re-use them and do not re-use the potting soil.

If your plants get too big or stop producing or just look bad you can: (1) start all over or (2) pull out a few of the plants to leave more room for the remaining plants. Postpone total replanting until later. Remember that containers give you permission to change your mind, change your location or change your view. It's up to you.

Additional Reading:

Pests of Landscape Trees and Shrubs, UC ANR Publication #3359, 1994.

Selecting and Growing House Plants, USDA Home and Garden Bulletin No. 82, 1963.

Indoor Landscaping with Living Foliage Plants, Texas A&M University, Publication B-1118, 1972.