



### Volunteer Program

Tulare/Kings Counties

## Container Gardening: Getting Ready to Plant

by Nancy Hawkins, UC Master Gardener

In a world of limited time and space, container gardens seem to make more and more sense. Containers allow you to enjoy growing plants in places you thought impossible or unthinkable. Poor soil, unpredictable weather, and limited space are no longer excuses for not being able to enjoy the simple pleasures of gardening.

The popularity of container gardening has exploded. Container gardening allows you to create special gardens to fit any situation. Plants in containers are showing up everywhere from front porches to rooftops, and window sills to backyard patios. Containers can be used to provide focal points, divide spaces, create privacy, screen objectionable views, accent the landscape, or grow tasty herbs, fruits and vegetables.



Dwarf peach tree in a pot

Containers can change the entire look of a landscape by providing instant color anywhere at any time. Even when there is ample room to garden in the ground, well-placed containers within the garden can provide easy-to-achieve seasonal changes. Successful container gardeners know that a good looking, well-maintained and long-lasting container doesn't just happen on its own. When a few basic principles are applied, however, even first-time gardeners can create and maintain attention-grabbing containers.

Soils for containers need to be well aerated and drained while still retaining enough moisture for plant growth. When choosing what to use to fill containers, never use garden soil by itself. Soil mixes for containers are modified to ensure proper drainage and aeration. An assortment of container soils can be found under a variety of trade names and sizes. The choice of soil is determined by the type of plants you are growing. Succulents, herbs, and perennials tend to prefer soils that are well-drained and don't retain a lot of moisture. Choose a soil with high quality ingredients such as vermiculite, perlite, sphagnum peat moss, pine bark and/or compost. For use with tropical and foliage plants, choose a media with more peat as these plants prefer moister growing conditions. Garden soil can be used in a container but needs to be modified or amended. An acceptable soil based mix can be made by using one part garden soil, one part peat moss and one part perlite or coarse builder's sand.

You can also make your own potting mix in which you can control the ingredients used to ensure quality and save money! You can create a potting mix that will be long lasting, airy, retains moisture and has some nutrition. You can change the recipe to fit the needs of the different kinds of plants you are potting. For instance, if you are potting succulents, you will want to add coarse river sand, pea gravel and/or additional perlite to increase drainage. For blueberries and other acid loving plants, you will need to add soil sulfur to reduce the pH to 4.5.



Making potting soil on blue tarp

### Basic Blend for Potting Mix

1 part bagged potting soil – to serve as a good base

1 part peat moss – to add nutrients, hold water and increase acidity

1 part perlite and/or vermiculite – for good drainage by creating air pockets for water to pass through and to keep the mix from being too heavy and dense

1 part compost – to add high amounts of nutrients

1 part composted chicken manure or worm castings – to increase the fertility of the mix

Perhaps the easiest way to mix all these ingredients is to lay a large blue tarp on the ground. Use a coffee can, bucket or some other measuring device to place a scoop of each ingredient on the tarp. Then, pick the tarp up by opposite corners, and roll the tarp over to mix. Open the tarp, and add a can full of each ingredient. If the tarp becomes too heavy to roll, use a shovel or a rake to mix the ingredients.

Next week, we will learn how to choose pots, pick plants to fill the containers, and how to care for our new decorative planters.

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