



Container Gardening: Part 2

by Nancy Hawkins, UC Master Gardener

In last week's article, I wrote about the steps you need to follow to get started in container gardening. I introduced you to a number of ways to enjoy the simple pleasures of gardening while creating attention-grabbing containers.

Your choice of container (along with choice of plants) communicates feelings and sets a mood. It can be amusing, classic, creative, stylish, primitive, country, environmentally friendly and more. Of course, container size needs to match the size and weight of the plants you are using. Larger and heavier plants will require bigger pots made of stronger materials.



Succulents in a shoe

The type of plants you choose to put in your container will depend on location, light and temperature. Make sure you choose plants with similar growing requirements for your container. How you arrange them depends on how you will be looking at the pot. If you will be looking at the pot from all sides, the classic approach is to place tall plants in the center and then surround them with shorter mounding plants and finally finishing off with trailing plants along the edges. If it will be viewed from the front, locate the tall plants at the back and work forward with shorter plants and then trailing types. If you are not sure of your design, set the plants on top of the soil to visualize the arrangement before you start to plant. You can then adjust as needed.

In choosing plants, a good rule of thumb is to pick a "thriller, filler, and spiller." The thriller should be eye catching, colorful and the focal point of your container. The fillers and spillers need to have the same growing requirements as the main plant, but can be different colors and shapes. Fillers will fill in the space around the focal plant while spillers fall over the side of the container. Examples of fillers and spillers are baby's tears, blue star creeper, creeping thyme and Irish moss. While it is easy to focus on ornamentals, edibles work just as well. A mix of spring greens, kale and spinach will add to your salads and look great in your container.



Wheelbarrow planter

When you have selected your container, plants, and soil, you are ready to pot up your container. First, cover the drainage holes with mesh or window screening to prevent the soil from washing out onto your patio or deck. A common mistake is to put a layer of gravel in the bottom of containers, but this actually impedes drainage and reduces the amount of space for roots. Fill the pot with soil to within a few inches from the top. The amount of soil required at this point depends upon the size of plants you are adding. Use less soil if you are using large plants with a bulky root ball. If you are planting small nursery seedlings, add more soil. Add slow-release fertilizer to the top of the soil and work it in well to a depth of 6 to 8 inches. Pack the soil and fertilizer into the container with your hands, making sure not to leave any air holes.

Plant the large plants first and add smaller plants as you move towards the edges of the pots. If the planter is to be viewed from one side only, place the tallest plants in the back of the container, adding the rest of the plants according to height. If the planter is to be viewed from all sides, put the tallest plant in the center, then add the next tallest plants, rotating the pot as you go. Add more soil and make sure that the roots are covered by no more than a half inch of soil.

Maintaining your container garden requires some work. Because containerized plants have a very limited soil volume, proper watering and fertilizing are critical in maintaining an attractive pot throughout the growing season. The frequency of watering a container depends on the time of the year, location of the container, how long the container has been planted, type of container and plants. There are no hard and fast rules when it comes to watering. You have to check your containers on a regular basis and know the requirements of the plants. The easiest way to test for soil moisture is to poke your finger into the soil to feel how moist the soil is. If you have a drip system in your yard, consider adding your potted plants to it. Then your pots will be automatically watered, even when you are gone on vacation. Some grooming is needed to maintain an attractive container. You may need to pinch back, trim, dead head, or even replace plants to keep your container looking its best.

Pick your location, container and plants. Experiment with color, form, texture, size and shape. Let the fun begin!



More potted plants on patio

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