

Success with Containers

By Eleanor Brown, Master Gardener

Container gardening can be fun, creative and provide beautiful accents to a large garden and expanded opportunities to a small garden or patio. The first question you might ask yourself is: “what kind of container should I use?” and the answer is “anything that will hold soil and has drainage.” The most common pots, of course, are the terra-cotta or clay pots that come in all shapes and sizes and can be found everywhere. Terra cotta is porous, thereby allowing for evaporation, and helping to wick away salts and minerals from plant roots. Unfortunately, terra cotta can be heavy, particularly as the containers gets larger; and, terra cotta is breakable. Plastic containers are light, but do not insulate well; they are nonporous allowing moisture to be retained. Although somewhat more durable than terra cotta, in time, they can become brittle and crack. There are colorful ceramic containers in a variety of shapes and sizes. They are nonporous and, also, can be very heavy. If you want the look of terra-cotta or ceramic but want something lighter, containers molded from foam/fiberglass are becoming more and more available. Just be sure to drill drainage holes in the bottom if they don’t already exist. Wood is another choice. It insulates, is porous, and is somewhat durable, although over time wood can rot. In our area wine barrels cut in half make great containers.



But you don’t have to limit yourself to standard containers, you can use boots, shoes, tea kettles, or pails. Wheelbarrows make large easily moveable containers. You can even use baskets lined with moss. There is a type of decorative container called a cache. They generally don’t have drainage holes but can be used to hold a plant potted in an unattractive container which does have drainage and can be easily removed for watering.

Once you’ve selected the container, it’s important to select the medium in which to plant. It should be porous and lightweight. Garden soil is not used in containers because of its weight and density. Planting mixes, available at any garden center, contain the right ingredients to assure successful and happy plants. You can also, purchase specialized mixes for bonsai, orchid, cactus, or aquatic plantings. To aid in retaining water, water absorbing polymers can be added to the planting mix. Time release fertilizers can also, be added before planting to fertilize over a designated period of time.

What can be planted in containers? Annuals and perennials make fine choices. Small trees such as Japanese maples or dwarf varieties do well in large containers. Container gardening is great for those California natives we want to grow that require excellent drainage. Bulbs of all kinds do well. Try vegetables like tomatoes, peppers, leaf lettuce, or herbs. Any of the above can be mixed or matched in one container for a special look. Just be sure to pair plants together that have the same water and sun requirements. For more ideas peruse the web, garden magazines and garden books. Experiment and try different combinations.

To maintain your new container garden water and fertilize regularly. Watch for insects and diseases and treat as you would any other plant. Then enjoy the beauty you have created.

For further information go to <http://ucanr.org/index.cfm> and enter “container gardening” in the search box. General gardening information can be obtained by going to <http://acmg.ucdavis.edu/> or calling the hot lines: 925-960-9420 or 510-639-1371.