

## Hanging Baskets and Window Boxes

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Hanging baskets or window boxes full of flowers or foliage plants give a color boost to your house, patio and garden. They can be used effectively, even in a very small space. If you choose plants carefully, you can change the plantings to suit every season.

### Gardening in Containers

A lightweight potting mix is needed for container gardening. Soilless planting mixes provide excellent drainage, aeration and water holding capacity. Be sure that your basket or window box has drainage holes; waterlogged mix leads to root rot and plant death.

Wire or plastic baskets are available. I personally have started with all plastic baskets, but am inclined to switch over to wire. Both have their advantages and disadvantages. Plastic is inexpensive, easy to plant and is slower to dry out, but crack with age, especially when in full sun all/part of the day. Wire baskets allow heavier plants, often are more attractive and obviously do not deteriorate. Window baskets are usually plastic or wood.

To keep the planting mix in a wire basket, use liners made of sphagnum or peat moss. Remember that both hanging baskets and especially window boxes require a strong support system. Think ahead to the extra weight that a fresh watering will add.

I recommend that you start with young, healthy plants, since they will adapt quicker, yet I have had success when dividing a plant which has overgrown its container, occasionally breaking it as it grew several times larger in the years! Of course you have probably guessed that all these have been in those cheaper plastic baskets!

### Planting a Moss-Lined Wire Basket

First soak the sphagnum/peat moss overnight in very warm water. Squeeze out as much water as possible and line the moss between the wires snugly from the inside of the basket. The moss should be 1 in. thick and 4 in. high and add potting mixture up to that height. Water plants well before planting, and pinch back flowers on new transplants if you want quicker growth. To add extra growth and color, you may want to poke a hole in the moss and place a new plant through the wire basket on the side, making sure the roots are well through the moss into the potting mixture. Frequent monitoring the first week or two is essential

### **Keeping the Potting Mixture Moist (even when planting)**

Remember that containers can dry out quickly, especially if exposed to sun and wind. Daily or even twice-daily watering may be needed, especially in July and August. I use a drip/mister system that runs off of black, plastic  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch hose, from a valve which is governed by a timer. In the extreme heat months, I set mine for three waterings a day, each for three minutes. If you water them manually, a water wand facilitates watering difficult-to-reach containers; if you travel, you will need to arrange for a "plant sitter!".

With the frequent watering, nutrients are flushed out quickly. Therefore, it is important to fertilize on a regular, frequent schedule. Liquid fertilizers are the easiest, yet timed-release pellets can be mixed at time of planting. Feed baskets every two weeks from spring through summer with a complete liquid fertilizer, diluted to half strength. Remove fading flowers as the season progresses to encourage new growth. Shade cloth above, of varying light blocking degrees, can alter a hot patio into just the setting you need.

### **Wide Variety of Choices**

There really is a vast array of plants to choose from: you just need to decide if you want color which goes upright or with hanging trailers. The many varieties of ivy are an obvious choice of an easy start. There are many succulents which hang attractively and which give off beautiful flower stalks, and this has my current fascination. Of course annuals such as petunias are an obvious summer choice. Even herbs, like Rosemary do very well in this setting. How about miniature roses? Well, you may experiment and enjoy as you go!

Well, that's enough to give you a good start and you will find plenty of choices for baskets, lining material, hanging hardware, as well as an interesting variety of plants at any full scale nursery. An excellent source of plant ideas is found in my favorite gardening resource, Sunset's **Western Garden Book**. Any time of the year is acceptable to start, but the choice at most nurseries is at its prime from April through July. Happy hanging!



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