

Contain Yourself

Whether you live in a tiny city apartment or on a large country estate, gardening in containers is a way to add colour and the beauty of nature to your surroundings.

The three main elements of creating successful containers gardens are:

- Choosing the pots
- Getting the right planting medium
- Selecting the plants

In all of these elements, the key is to create a healthy growing environment for the plant roots. For a healthy root system, water must be able to pass quickly through the soil. As the water drains out, air replaces it in the soil and an exchange of carbon dioxide is made with the plant roots. This movement of water and air is essential to a healthy plant.

Here are some tips to help you choose from the dizzying array of pots, troughs and boxes:

- Pick the spot for your garden first and then find a container to suit it. For example, a quaint wooden trough would not suit a modern balcony, nor would classic urn shaped pots be the best choice for an informal country style garden. In addition to style considerations, give attention to size and proportion issues.
- Consider the weight of the container – not only empty, but filled with wet soil and plants. If there is a strong prevailing breeze across your outdoor space, the container must be heavy enough to prevent it from tipping over. On the other hand, the structure on which the containers are placed must be able to support them (so a large concrete trough would be less than ideal for a balcony or wooden porch, and a 6 ft wooden trough would need a VERY strong ledge to make it a suitable window box). Since a 30-gallon planter can weigh more than 200 pounds once it's filled, think about either planting the container in place, or setting it on plant casters or dollies.
- Clay/terracotta pots are attractive and complement a wide range of foliage and flowering plants. They are the traditional potting container because, in addition to draining well, they wick moisture through their sides. This provides a drier root environment, which means less opportunity for root diseases. However, it also means more frequent watering is needed. If you tend to underwater, use terra cotta pots for only drought tolerant plants, or choose another type of container. On the down side, clay pots can be heavy and must be protected in colder climates during the winter to prevent cracking. A glazed clay container is non-porous, creating a moisture barrier. Because this will not allow the root system to breathe, glazed pots are best used with a regular terracotta pot inside of them.
- Plastic pots are inexpensive, lightweight and functional, and come in a wide variety of shapes, sizes and colors. If you don't like the look of plastic, apply a faux finish to fool the eye, or slip the plastic pots inside other containers. With the proper soil mix and attentive watering, plants do well in plastic pots. If you tend to underwater your plants, plastic is a better choice than terra cotta for you. However, plastic containers may need to be weighted down to stay in place on windy days.
- Wood containers look good in naturalistic environments, and most plants do well in them. Wood drains better than plastic but does not have the wicking advantage of clay, and wood containers can be heavy when planted. Choose containers made of hardwood, such as redwood, cedar or cypress, which are less susceptible to rot over time. Lining wood containers with heavy duty plastic bags will give you added protection from moisture, but you must remember to provide proper drainage.
- Metal containers can be used successfully in many modern settings. Galvanized containers are the best for planting – they won't leach rust or chemicals into the soil. Unless the container was designed as a planter, you'll need to add drainage holes to the bottom of the pot, or slip other pots inside it.
- Found items can add variety and whimsy to your container garden. If you're going to plant directly in such items as watering cans, old boots, teapots or wheelbarrows consider drainage and air movement around the roots of the plants.

Now that you chosen the perfect containers, you need to select the planting medium and the plants. We'll cover that in a future issue of Tales From the Porch Swing.

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