

CONTAINER GARDENING

Container gardening is undergoing a resurgence, particularly in urban areas where gardens may consist of only decks and patios. The combination of stunning new plant containers, a wide range of potting soils, slow-release fertilizers and ever-improving plant choices, has given buyers courage, confidence and passion. Garden shops have sensed the change and responded to the challenge by stocking their spaces with enticing choices.

WHY USE CONTAINERS?

Creating a garden with containers allows you to be versatile and creative. You can plant annuals or perennials, flowers or shrubs, herbs or vegetables in containers. You can define traffic flow by careful placement of containers, or screen out unwanted views or sunlight. Containers can be moved to allow you to change your plants with the season. Plants in containers provide focal points that enhance your garden and residence. In areas such as decks and courtyards, containers with carefully chosen plants will draw the eye and soften the architecture.



Phormium. PHOTO: Vic Bentley

THE BASICS

A more successful and satisfying experience with container gardening will result if some basic points are observed.

Containers



Front cover:
Mixed planter.
PHOTO:
Don Wilson

- Choose containers that complement the plants; consider the size, shape, texture and color of containers.
- Use larger planters whenever possible as they provide for stronger, deeper roots and dry out less quickly than small pots. Plants need several inches of soil beneath them for best results. If you are featuring shrubs, small trees or perennials, larger pots will allow for growth as the plants mature. Lessen the weight of very tall containers holding shallow-rooted plants by filling the lower portion of the pot with packing chips.
- Many new polyurethane, fibreglass and resin pots now resemble ceramic and wood. They are built for a wider temperature range and are easy to manoeuvre due to their lightness.

- Older style plastic containers are serviceable, but deteriorate more quickly under UV rays. Terra cotta pots look classic but should be soaked before planting and need close watching as they dry out quickly. They are easily broken in handling and are prone to crack at lower temperatures. Glazed containers retain more water than unglazed. Cedar tubs and planters are an attractive natural look on any deck, but will succumb to dry rot unless the containers are lined.

- Healthy plants need water, oxygen and good drainage. Check pots before buying to make sure the drainage hole is at least 1.5 cm (1/2 in.) in diameter. Old crockery or pebbles placed at the bottom of the container will encourage drainage, and a piece of screening placed over the drainage hole will keep out slugs. Remembering that plants need porosity, place containers on wheels, blocks or pot feet for better air circulation, and to protect deck and hard surfaces from staining.

Soils

There is a wide range of potting soils on the market, but the novice gardener should read labels with care to see if they include: organic water-retaining material like peat moss or compost, inorganic materials for drainage like sand or perlite, and nutrients like compost. The ideal soil mix for containers will be porous, fast-draining and provide nutrients.

Many gardeners create their own mix by blending equal parts of mineral (sand, vermiculite, loamy garden soil) and organic (compost, bark, peat moss) components. Adjust your mix to allow for weight and type of plant requirements.

YOUR STYLE

An exciting grouping of pots can create the atmosphere and charm of an outdoor room.

- Think about a theme. Themes could be a scented garden, certain color combinations, an edible garden, a one-plant theme like ornamental grasses, or a meditative space.
- On a simple diagram, record the square footage of your space, as well as site-lines from inside and out, vertical lines like walls and railings, and privacy options. Follow the path of the sun and monitor the sun, shade, wind and rain conditions on the patio or deck.
- Sit outside and imagine your planted containers at their full height and maturity. What height, mass and color would be most satisfying?
- Many gardeners will have one container as a focal point, with surrounding pots complementing the original. As a rule the planting design of a container uses the three shapes of tall, bushy and trailing because they are most pleasing to the eye.



Hosta. PHOTO: Janet Sawatsky



Planters filled with mixed succulents. PHOTO: Barry Roberts

Plants

Put your plan into action when you shop for plants.

- Watch for signage in shops. Most have plants grouped by sun, shade, scented, basket stuffers and other categories.
- For tall plants consider Cosmos, feather grass (*Stipa barbata*), purple fountain grass (*Pennisetum*), Iris, gay feather (*Liatis*), *Ligularia*, canna lilies, Russian sage, *Phormium*, phlox, yucca.
- For bushy or mounding plants try *Artemisia*, coleus, barren wort (*Epimedium*), fescue, geranium, heliotrope, coral bells/alum root (*Heuchera*), hosta, candytuft (*Iberis*), forget-me-not, thyme, viola.
- For trailing plants consider licorice plant (*Helichrysum*), lobelia, lemon-scented pelargonium, verbena.
- **Theme containers could include:**
 - Scented – *Dianthus*, licorice plant, variegated sage, woolly lavender
 - Spring – boxwood (*Buxus*), primrose, polyanthus, rosemary, scilla
 - Spring bulbs – crocus, foxtail lily (*Eremurus*), fritillaria, narcissus, ornamental onion (*Allium*)
 - Herb – chives, fennel, lemon balm, mint, parsley, summer savory, thyme
 - Salad – arugula, chives, leaf lettuce, peppers, tomatoes (Tumbling Tom)
 - Wildflower – bellflower (*Campanula*), Carpathian harebell (*Campanula carpatica*), cranesbill, hecherella, rock rose (*Helianthemum*), periwinkle
 - Shade – astilbe, astrantia, barren wort, bellflower, bergenia, coleus, columbine, fuchsia, hosta, impatiens, Lady's mantle, morning glory, nicotiana, pansy, sword fern
 - Sun-loving – *Alyssum*, aster, Carpathian harebell, coneflower (*Rudbeckia*), coreopsis, English daisy, gay feather, globe thistle, marguerite, marigold, phlox, salvia, sweet pea, verbena
 - Hot/dry – *Armeria*, dianthus, dwarf phlox, Hen-and-chicks (*Sempervivum*), Lamb's ears (*Stachys byzantina*), Maltese cross (*Lychnis*), oxalis, portulaca, rock geranium, sedum

- Autumn – *Artemisia*, brassica, chrysanthemum, dianthus, hebe
- Evergreen – *Gaultheria*, Japanese skimmia (*Skimmia japonica*), juniper, *Leucothoe*
- Children's basket – impatiens, licorice plant (*Helichrysum*), petunias, snap dragons (*Antirrhinum*), verbena
- Children's wildflower container – Aster, lavender, lobelia, phlox, scabious, snow-in-summer (*Cerastium tomentosum*), stocks, verbena
- Pink/purple/red – impatiens, lobelia, pelargonium, pendulous begonia, verbena
- Healing plants – chamomile, fennel, feverfew, lavender, rosemary, thyme
- Grass combinations – (1) moor grass (*Molinia caerulea*), purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) and verbena; (2) variegated oatgrass (*Arrhenatherum*), allium, salvia and yarrow (*Achillea*); (3) verbena, purple coneflower, thyme 'Bressingham pink' and *Pennisetum orientale*; (4) switch grass (*Panicum virgatum*) and fountain grass (*Pennisetum setaceum* 'Rubrum')



Phormiums with frog. PHOTO: Janet Sawatsky

Before you make the final purchase, take the time to place plant combinations beside each other to discern the most pleasing results. Remember that containers can be used year round and that simpler is generally better.

CARE AND FEEDING

Water gently, using a soft flow of water or a spray from a hose or watering can. Hanging baskets can be watered with a wand attached to a garden hose. Many watering systems are available for patio plants; they are useful when the homeowner is on vacation. If water runs straight through a pot, it may be a sign that the plant is pot bound. Adding new soil to the sides of the container will slow water loss. Containers can also be watered from below, by setting them in a waterproof tray or trench which is then filled with water. Plants will draw up the water from their roots.

Plants in containers need feeding because watering leaches out nutrients in the soil. Adding a slow-release fertilizer to the pot when planting will provide most annuals with the nutrients they need, but perennials will require regular feeding during the growing season. In warm weather, feed every 2 weeks; in colder weather feed every 6–8 weeks.

Careful pruning of container plants will encourage blooming, and will maintain their size. Container plants can be trained to trail or to climb trellises or poles.

No matter what type of container or plant you choose, and no matter where you place them, they will add color, interest and pleasure to your garden.

REFERENCES

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 Sunset Books (1973). *Gardening in Containers*. Sunset Books, Menlo Park, CA.
www.all-about-planters.com



Master Gardeners

Association of British Columbia

The Master Gardeners Association of British Columbia is a volunteer organization providing information about gardening and horticulture to the community and educating people about environmentally responsible gardening practices.

Through its chapters in Vancouver, Victoria, Summerland, Vancouver Island and Prince George, the MGABC

- runs a series of clinics at garden centers and major garden events
- presents gardening programmes in schools, hospitals and seniors' homes
- works with community groups on various "greening" projects.

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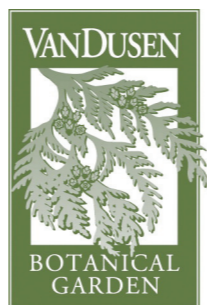
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