



Container Gardening

Lisha Utt, Frederick County Master Gardener

Question: I have tried to do some container gardening but have not had much luck. My pots never seem to look very good. Can you please give me some ideas on how I can improve?
Thank you.

Answer:

Gardening in containers is one of my favorite things to do. It is the perfect option where space is at a premium such as small balconies or patio gardens, and for softening hard surfaces such as entrances and steps like you are going to do. Containers also allow you to grow species of plants you might otherwise not be able to in your yard. And don't forget window boxes and other types of containers that can be attached to a wall bringing color and interest to your vertical spaces. But my favorite reason for container gardening is the opportunity for creativity it provides for both the beginner and the experienced gardener. So here are some basic how to's to help make growing your containers a great success.

Let's begin with the containers themselves. The most important requirement of a container is that it must hold enough potting soil for the roots to be secure and supply sufficient moisture and nutrients to the plants. It must also have drainage holes and should be reasonably stable and secure especially if the container is to be hung. Once you have met these three basic requirements, the types of containers you use in your garden are only limited by your imagination.

After you have selected your container it's time to move on to the soil. There are many, many different types and brands of soil. It's best to use a potting soil designed for containers and not the least expensive bag offered. You'll increase your chance for success if you spend a little extra on your soil.....with potting mix you usually get what you pay for.

Finally it's time to select the plants. But first there are some things you'll need to consider.

- Assess your location, is it in full sun or full shade or does it get morning sun and afternoon shade or maybe the reverse? Typically plants that can tolerate full sun should also do well in a site with morning shade and afternoon sun. Shade loving plants can usually tolerate morning sun if they find themselves in afternoon shade.
- Spend a little time thinking about what you are trying to achieve.....instant bright colors (you may want to rely on flowering annuals) or a more permanent display (consider evergreens, small trees, shrubs or perennials.)

When designing your container it is helpful to think of plants in three groups----

- Upright, plants that grow tall and can serve as a focal point, such as *Pennisetum rubrum* or Red Grass, Caladiums or *Pelargonium x hortorum*, Zonal Geraniums.
- Bushy, plants to fill in the mid-level of the planter such as *Heliotropium*, Heliotrope, Impatiens and *Argyranthemum frutescens*, Argyranthemum.

- Trailers, plants that cascade over the side and soften the edges such as *Bidens ferulifolia*, *Biden*, *Calibrachoa* , Super Bells or Million Bells and Verbena.

When looking at colors the rule of thumb is that it's better to group plants within the hot and cold ranges, i.e. group reds, oranges and yellows together, or the softer pinks, purples and blues. But don't be afraid to group plants together from across the color wheel. Experiment, you'll know when the colors look right to you. And let's not forget about foliage. Foliage can provide interest through texture, shape of leaves, variegation, even color.

So when designing a mixed container you should try to include plants from each of the categories, upright, bushy and trailing. It can also be effective to have just one type of plant in a container or even a mixed color grouping of all the same type of plants. Just remember no matter which plants you mix and match they all must have the same growth requirements for the container to be a growing success.

To help me decide how many plants I will need I cut out a circle on a piece of newspaper the same diameter as the container I want to fill. When I go to the garden center or nursery to select my plants, I take my "newspaper" with me. There I can arrange the plants I like on the paper circle to come up with my favorite combination. I plant the individual plants right next to each other in the container, so setting them right up against each other on the paper circle shows me the number of plants I will need. This method works even if you're planting all the same type of plants in your container.

Finally a few tips on caring for and maintaining your container plants.

- First select the right plants for your location using the information we have already discussed.
- Be sure to water sufficiently. Water is the secret ingredient for growing successful container gardens. Early morning is the best time to water in the summer months. Water before plants start to wilt and until the water runs out the bottom of the container. In the heat of the summer you'll probably be watering everyday.
- It is also important to feed your container plants regularly. Liquid fertilizers are easy to use when watering your plants or mix in a time-release fertilizer when planting. No matter which type of fertilizer you choose always follow the manufacturers' instructions.
- Keep the plants attractive, remove the dead or faded flowers, cut out any dead leaves or stems and stake tall plants or prune to maintain shape if necessary.

So try these ideas this spring and I know you'll be enjoying beautiful containers all summer. Happy Gardening!

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For more information about horticulture or the Master Gardener Program in Frederick County, call the Frederick County Office of the Maryland Cooperative Extension, 301- 600-1596, or visit <http://www.frederick.umd.edu/>. Our mission is to educate Maryland residents about safe, effective and sustainable horticultural practices that build healthy gardens, landscapes and communities.