CONTAINER GARDENING BASICS  
Lisha Utt, Frederick County Master Gardener

Planting in containers is a great way to get started gardening. It's fun and easy and you'll be a "pro" in no time. Container gardening is the perfect option where space is at a premium such as small balconies or patio gardens. Containers also allow you to grow species of plants you might otherwise not be able to in your yard. Don't forget window boxes and containers that can be attached to a wall. But my favorite reason for container gardening is the opportunity for creativity it provides for both the beginner and the experienced gardener.

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 selecting your container it's time to move on to the soil. There are many different types and brands of soil. It's best to use a potting soil designed for containers and not the least expensive. You'll increase your chance for success if you spend a little extra on your soil.

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.

When designing your container it is helpful to think of plants in three groups----upright, plants that grow tall and serve as a focal point, bushy, plants to fill in the mid-level of the planter and trailers, plants that cascade over the side and soften the edges.

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 might want to include plants from each of the categories, upright, bushy and trailing. It's also effective to have just one type of plant in a container or even a mixed color grouping of all the same type of plants. Designing your container is the fun part. 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.

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Finally a few words on caring for and maintaining your containers. First select the right plants for your location using the information we have already discussed. Then be sure to water sufficiently. 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. 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 manufacturer’s instructions. And last but not least, 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. Most of all enjoy your containers and have fun!!

For more information about the Frederick County Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, visit: http://extension.umd.edu/frederick-county/home-gardening or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office, 301-600-1596. Find us on Facebook at http://www.facebook.com/mastergardenersfrederickcountymaryland

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