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Getting Started in Container Gardening

Container gardening has come a long way from a pot of annual geraniums on the front porch. In fact, it's become a whole new way of gardening.

Gardeners choose containers for a variety of reasons - from limited in-ground planting space to simply enjoying the beauty of a lovely planting in a well-chosen container.

Plants in containers are, obviously, not growing in their natural environment, therefore, you'll achieve your best results with some understanding of the components of container gardening: the container, the potting mix and the needs of containerized plants.

When selecting a container, consider the mature size of the plant. If the container is too small the plant will quickly exhaust nutrients and oxygen in the potting mix; if too large, the roots can't completely permeate the potting mix. It may be necessary to start with a liner pot – a smaller pot which sits inside the larger pot your plant will eventually need as it grows. All containers must have drainage holes.

There are three basic types of containers: clay, plastic and wood.

Unglazed clay or terra-cotta pots are porous which prevents the potting mix from getting soggy and allows air circulation to roots, however, the potting mix dries out more quickly. Glazed clay pots are less porous, therefore, the potting mix holds water longer. The disadvantages of clay pots are their weight, tendency to chip and that they can't be wintered outside without some protection from frost.

Plastic pots are lightweight, inexpensive and nonporous which means they will hold in moisture – a plus in our hot, dry climate. However, they are also non-insulating so roots become both hotter and colder depending on air temperatures.

Wood pots are porous (if the wood is unsealed) and naturally insulating which keeps the potting mix at a relatively even temperature. If made from cedar, redwood or cypress they are very long-lasting.

You'll be filling your containers with a potting mix rather than with native soil. Potting mixes should be both fast draining and moisture retentive. A

good quality mix will contain plant food (fertilizer and nutrients) and additives such as peat which holds water, and vermiculite, perlite or pumice which keeps the peat from compacting. A soil-based mix should contain sterilized soil which eliminates weed seeds and disease.

Container plants dry out quickly so careful watering is imperative. In hot, dry weather or a windy spot, they may need checked daily for water. When you do water, water deeply to saturate the soil – water should run from the drainage holes.

Here are a few tips to reduce your water usage:

1. Mulch the surface of your potting mix with bark or pebbles
2. Put one container inside another and fill the empty space with dampened peat moss. Cover the surface with bark or pebbles.
3. Group pots closely together to provide shade for each other.
4. If possible, provide a source of shade during the hottest part of the day.
5. Use water-wise plants that won't mind drying out a bit between watering.

Feeding container plants is your second priority as they will soon use up the nutrients in the potting mix.

Annuals, with their short lives and numerous blooms, benefit from inorganic fertilizers made from synthetic substances. They have highly concentrated amounts of nutrients that are immediately available to your plants.

Longer-lived plants such as herbaceous perennials and shrubs benefit from organic fertilizers (bat guano, fish emulsion, bonemeal) that add nutrients to the potting mix that slowly become available to your plants. They are longer lasting than inorganic fertilizers.