

Tips on Container Gardening

© Phyllis White
Gallatin Empire Garden Club

Everyone loves to have beautiful containers of plants around their home and garden. Most of the good nurseries around town have beautiful containers filled with lush plants. Have you ever wondered why the nurseries seem to have larger, fuller plants and planters than you do? The answer is regular fertilization and correct watering. And, of course, the nursery has stuffed the pot to reach its full potential in the spring when you're looking at purchasing it. It may not look as well two months from now. For economy and better-looking pots at the height of summer, create your own patio container. First, you must decide on which pot, where to place it, and what plants, colors and textures you wish to combine for that stunning effect. Here are tips I've gathered for great containers.

- Choose your container to create strong visual impact when combined with the plant material. It should complement the plants. Often, the best containers are unexpected objects used in a new way (watering cans, troughs, shoes)
- Plant sun plants with sun plants and shade plants with shade plants, after you've decided where the pot is going to be placed.
- Choose plants that have similar water needs (no cacti with water-loving plants)

- Choose plants for proportion and shape:
 - ▶ something that spills over the edge, and
 - ▶ something with height, and
 - ▶ something that fills in the middle ground.Bring your knowledge of flower design to the container. Depending on its shape, you may want to plant horizontally, asymmetrically, vertically, etc. For a round container, position the center plant first. Work outward, adding foliage plants interspersed with flowering and, finally, trailing plants.

- Choose colors of plant material after careful consideration of the mood color evokes:
 - ▶ red, orange, and yellow evoke a feeling of "warmth" [sense of well-being and an association with the sun, vibrant]
 - ▶ purple, blue and green create a "cool" effect [soothing, tranquil]
 - ▶ create harmony by combining dark, medium and light tones of one pigment (or by mixing plants whose colors sit next to one another on the color wheel) i.e., pinkish purple and lilac-blue
 - ▶ create contrast by mixing hues that are diametrically opposite one another on the color wheel, such as, violet and yellow

- complementary color can be exciting; use pale shades to soften the contrast

- Choose plants for their texture:
 - ▶ Choice of texture is determined by where you intend to place the pot. Small plant features such as tiny flowers and feathery leaves are appreciated close up. If the pot is seen from a distance, work with larger flowers and bold leaf shapes.

- ▶ Use foliage plants – a good ratio is 1/3 flowers to 2/3 foliage.



Warm, vibrant colors



Container with harmonious, small-leaved texture.



The nitty-gritty for creating and maintaining great containers:

Pots: Anything that can hold soil and has a drainage hole can be used as a pot. However, small pots will need to be watered more often. When the temperatures start reaching 90 in the shade you may need to water a small pot more than once a day.

If you want easy care, large pots are better. They have larger soil volume so the plants won't need to be watered as often. More soil also means your plants can grow a bigger root system. Plants with lots of roots tend to be healthy, happy plants.

What kind of material your pot is made out of will also impact how quickly the soil in your pot dries. Clay pots and cocoa fiber/moss lined pots will dry out more quickly than plastic or glazed pottery. Haven't we all experienced the hanging cocoa planter with wilted plants in the heat of the day? I've lined baskets like this with plastic bags, poked a few holes in it for drainage and then placed a baby diaper in the bottom for water storage before filling with potting mix. Consider, too, using the new water-absorbent polymers mixed in the soil when planting. Plastic and glazed pots are slower to dry because water doesn't evaporate through the sides of the pot.

Water your pot when the top of the soil is dry to the touch. Water until some water comes out of the drainage hole in the bottom of the pot. Be careful not to over water when the temperatures are cool. Keeping soil too wet will cause disease problems. Large pots are especially vulnerable to staying too wet because of their large soil volume. The thing that works for you in hot weather makes it a bit more difficult in cooler weather.

Be sure to use a good, light potting medium - not dirt from your garden. **Potting soil** is formulated to have a good ratio of water holding capacity and air space (roots need air space to be happy). Fill the pot completely with soil, leaving some space between the top of the soil and the top of the pot (this is sometimes referred to as head space). In large pots you can leave up to 2 inches, in smaller pots you might only leave ½ an inch. I realize that filling large pots with potting soil can be a bit pricey, however, that additional soil volume will really help give your plants a boost. If the pot is very deep, consider filling it with a bag of packing peanuts to take up space at the bottom. Make sure you don't plug the drainage hole. I've also used empty plastic water bottles to take up some space.

When adding soil to your pot, just pour or scoop it into the pot. Do not pat the soil down, this is unnecessary and will actually negatively affect your plants. Add your plants. Once the pot is filled, simply wet it down gently with water to settle the soil and add a bit more if necessary.

Do you really need to replace all of the soil every year? It is best to replace all of the soil every year but if last years' plants were healthy and you have a very large pot, you can replace the top half of the soil with new and leave the bottom half for one more year. Be sure to replace all of your soil at least every other year. If your plants had disease problems the year before, it is best to completely replace the potting medium.

Fertilizer is essential for having the best possible containers of plants. To maximize the plant material's potential you should fertilize regularly – that doesn't necessarily mean often. Fertilizer is



one of those things where more isn't necessarily better. It is possible to harm your plants by feeding too heavily.

We've all seen the N-P-K ratio numbers on fertilizer containers [Nitrogen (N), Phosphorous (P) and Potassium (K)]. If you want lots of blooms, chose a fertilizer with the middle number, the phosphorus, larger than the others. This prompts the plant to produce flowers. The easiest way to provide fertilizer to your plants is to incorporate a slow release fertilizer into the soil when you fill your pot. If you buy an already-planted container or if you forgot to incorporate the fertilizer, you can top-dress (spread the fertilizer on top of the soil) with it.

Fertilizers are either synthetic or organic. A note regarding organic fertilizers – while they are more expensive to purchase, they are more forgiving if you over-apply the material because they are slower to release and are less concentrated. Organic fertilizers promote a healthy microbial life in the soil which helps keep many diseases in check.

Slow-release or controlled release fertilizers will generally provide nutrition for 2 to 3 months or longer. Slow release fertilizers tend to be more expensive per package than water soluble, however, because you need to apply much less often, they aren't necessarily more expensive to use. Slow release fertilizers will slowly release a small amount of nutrients over a period of several months. How much is released at a time is largely dependant on soil temperatures. Microbes in the soil control how much slow release fertilizer is released at one time, and the microbes are more active at warm temperatures than cool temperatures. If you have plants in pots that are "heavy" feeders (those that need a lot of nutrition), such as the new petunias, you may want to use a slow release fertilizer every couple of weeks to boost the nutrition level.

You can also skip the slow-release fertilizer and use a traditional water-soluble fertilizer from the beginning. Generally you would apply a water-soluble fertilizer every week or every other week while watering your container. Read the directions on your fertilizer package for specific application instructions.

Other tips:

- ▶ If you have gone through a long rainy period or had a very heavy rainfall, an application of water soluble fertilizer will return some nutrition to your potting mix (what was probably there has likely washed away in the rain) and help your plants rebound.
- ▶ If your plants have grown very large, supplemental water soluble fertilizer may help them maintain lush growth.

Number of Plants: There are two basic ways to plant a combination. The traditional planting and the "living plant arrangement." Traditional planting is when you allow enough room between plants that the planter looks full after 2 to 3 weeks of additional growth. Generally, use 3 or maybe 4 plants in 10 or 12 inch planters. Five to 7 plants in an 16 to 20 inch planter and so on.

With the traditional planting, you need to have a bit of patience to get a completely full planter. However, the plants will be healthier. Fewer plants mean better root growth and thus healthier plants. Less crowded containers also have better air flow around the plants. Better air flow will help foliage dry faster which will decrease disease.

The living plant arrangement is when you place as many plants as possible into each planter. This allows the planter to look full immediately after planting. However, since living flower arrangements are crowded, they tend to have shorter longevity and often have greater disease problems.