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Outdoor Container Gardening

by Cecile Garrison, UC Master Gardener

There's no doubt about it, a container grown plant requires more attention than that same plant growing in the ground. If so, then why do people love growing plants in containers? Because of what you can do with them.

You can move them around to decorate a front door, patio, or garden. You can put pots of annuals in a faded perennial garden to spruce it up. You can add height to a flat landscape. You can have fruits, vegetables, and herbs year round. You can have a beautiful garden even if you live in an apartment --- and take it with you if you move.

When you place a living, breathing plant into a container you create a "dependent child." No, you don't have to walk it like a dog, or send it to college, but you do need to provide five basic elements for a healthy, long life. Here are my tips for success:

Soil: The growing medium should be light and fluffy, absorb water, and drain well. Don't use garden soil. It's too heavy and may contain disease organisms. Heavy soil compacts in containers and slows water and oxygen from reaching the root zone Perlite, vermiculite, and peat moss are used in mixes to add porosity for faster drainage and more oxygen around plant roots. Also don't add crushed rock to the bottom of the pot. That actually makes drainage worse, not better. If you are investing in expensive plants, then buy the best potting soil available.

Containers: The container should fit the plant and allow room for at least a year of growth. I have more success with unglazed clay pots, the bigger the better. I don't even think of using pots smaller than six inches, because of our summer heat. If containers will receive full sun, make sure they are 16-20 inches in diameter. Smaller sizes like 12-16 inches will work if afternoons are partially shaded. My longest container success is a rusty metal wheelbarrow overflowing with rosemary, thyme and ivy. It gets about six hours of morning sun and shade the rest of the day.

Roots frequently accumulate next to container walls. To help keep them cool in the summer try double potting. Put potting soil between the pots as an insulator. If you use decorative ceramic containers, be sure they have drainage holes, otherwise use them as a decorative cover to hide a well draining but unattractive container.

Water: Water is life! Plant roots function like a water pump, taking minerals and nutrients to every part of the plant. Two important things to remember about watering plants in containers: don't let the potting soil completely dry out between waterings and never allow plants to stand in water. Roots die in both situations.

Add water to container plants until water flows out the bottom. If saucers are used, be sure to empty them. Otherwise you can drown your plants. When the soil stays soggy, the oxygen is driven out of the soil pores, the roots suffocate and rot, and the plant dies.

Of course, different plants have different needs. I favor the tough ones that survive and even thrive on neglect. In most cases it is better to water thoroughly but let the plant dry a little before watering again. I depend on my $5.00 moisture meter to tell me when to water. If the potting soil does dry out completely, immerse the pot in water until bubbling stops. Most container plants in full sun will need daily watering during summer months.

Light: Plants have different light requirements. Read about your plant or ask someone who grows it successfully. If it is not thriving where it is, then try it in a different spot.

If a plant requires full sun, that equates to six hours of morning sun and partial shade in the afternoon when grown in a container in the valley. Plants that thrive in full sun all day in coastal regions need protection from our blistering afternoon heat. Full shade in our area means just that. Our summer sun will fry shade-loving plants in minutes!

My favorites for big containers in full sun are parsley, sage, rosemary, thyme, and most other herbs. Cosmos, daylilies, lantana, verbena, petunias, asparagus fern, agapanthus, Mexican primrose, and false heather are also good performers. Lately I've been planting numerous types of succulents.

Food: Plants, no matter where grown, need fertilizers containing three major plant nutrient elements: nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium. These nutrients are available in many different combinations and under a multitude of brand names. Choose one suitable for container plants to supply trace amounts of the other essential nutrients that ground grown plants can usually extract from the soil. Use according to the instructions on the package label or dilute even more.

Do not over fertilize or you could kill your plants! Fertilizer dissolved in water becomes a soluble salt. When water evaporates, the salts stay behind. This can damage roots directly, which weakens the plant and makes it susceptible to attack from insects and diseases. Maintain a healthy balance of water and fertilizer to avoid salt stress. And that's all there is to it. So now that you know the basics, use your imagination. Choose containers and plants to match your landscape and personality. Add some whimsy and charm to your neighborhood with your container gardening!

April 15, 2010