

Surry County Center

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Successful Container Gardening

Container gardening is a dimension to add personality to your landscape. Focal points and areas of interest can be defined through the choice of containers and plant material. Don't limit yourself to traditional containers. Get creative by looking around your house, garage, and yard. That old wheelbarrow, watering can, and pair of boots will draw attention to a favorite spot when grouped together. A hodge-podge of old pots, all painted in shade variations of the same hue, can be used to brighten the corner of a porch. Try adding trellises to a row of containers to hide an unwanted view from the deck. Plant with fragrant annual vines or vegetables and herbs. Instant salad! You can create a tropical retreat this year, and next year have an English garden. By following a few basic guidelines and your imagination, almost anything is possible with Container Gardening.

Containers

Containers need to be large enough to hold the roots of all the plants at maturity. Allow a few inches of soil beneath the root ball when planting. An inverted plastic nursery pot placed at the bottom of large containers will conserve soil and make it lighter in weight. Drainage holes are necessary in all containers

to prevent the roots from rotting. A pot shard or small rock placed over the hole will keep the water free-flowing. Raising the container slightly also helps in drainage and air circulation. In a practical sense, the new plastic resin pots have many advantages over clay, cement, metal, and wood. They are lightweight, retain moisture well, and can be left outside all year. Don't be afraid to try them. Remember that anything can be used as a container as long it will hold soil and allow drainage.



Design

A good basic design for a container uses three elements: A tall airy central focal plant; medium-sized denser, showier species to surround it; and cascading plants to soften the rim of the container. Try

experimenting with the many leaf colors and patterns found on foliage annuals and perennials to compliment or replace flowering plants. Mixing bloom and leaf size, shape, and texture adds additional interest to the design.

A plethora of design options are available. Small patio and topiary trees divide spaces on decks and patios. Bog and water gardens evoke relaxation and can be made using containers with holes. Monochromatic color themes lend a contemporary feel.

Planting Media

Never use garden soil in a container. It will compact and will not drain well, which results in poor air circulation to the plant's roots. The best choice is to use a good quality soil-less potting mix. Most commercial mixes come with an added wetting agent and a time release fertilizer. You can make your own (refer to table 1). Container soils should be changed every second year.

Potting Soil Recipe:

Mix one part each:

- Peat Moss
- Vermiculite or Perlite
- Sterile Potting Soil

Plant Selection

The only thing you need to remember when selecting plants for a container is that all plants must have the same requirement for light and water. Annuals, perennials, vegetables/herbs, and even small shrubs can be combined in a single container as long as each plant's needs are the same.

Planting

It is important to always start with a clean container. Wash any used pots in a 5% bleach solution (refer to table 2) and rinse well. Pre-moisten the potting medium before planting. Position the plants at the same depth as in their original container, making sure there is at least three inches of soil under the root ball for further root growth. Leave an inch or two from the top of the container for watering space. Place plants closer in a container than in the ground to give a fuller more mature appearance. Fill in around the root balls with additional soil and water well.

5% Bleach Solution:

Mix:

- 6 ounces of Clorox®
- 1 gallon of water.

Table 2

For further information on gardening and plant selection, visit the Surry website or stop by the local center of North Carolina

Cooperative
Extension.



www.ces.ncsu.edu/surry

Watering and Fertilization

Watering requirements are determined by the weather and by the size, type, and location of the container. The plant species is also a consideration in watering. Containers may need to be checked daily (twice a day during hot and windy weather). Test the soil with



thoroughly until the excess water runs out of

your finger and water only if it feels dry. Water

the bottom of the pot. If the soil has dried too much and shrunk from the sides of the container, you must re-hydrate the soil by submerging the pot halfway in a larger pail of water until the soil stops bubbling. Over-watering can also be a problem. Dump any water left standing in saucers under pots after watering. The frequent watering needs of container gardening quickly flush out the nutrients in the soil. A regular fertilization schedule must be followed to maintain healthy plants. Add a balanced (14-14-14) time-released fertilizer to the soil

according to the directions on the

package at the time of planting. Water-soluble fertilizers can also be used and applied weekly at one-quarter the recommended rate.



Maintenance

During the season it will be important to check the containers for disease and insect problems. Cut out any dead or damaged plant parts and remove any diseased plants. Spraying with a garden hose can usually control insects. If needed, use an appropriate pesticide. Trim back plants to maintain a pleasing size and shape or to promote a bushier appearance.

The time to bring any plant indoors for the winter is well before the heat in your house is turned on. Plants need to adapt gradually to the indoor

Photos courtesy of Wall Greenhouse and Nursery.

conditions of light and humidity.

Any

containers that will break need to be stored in the garage or basement. Plants that go dormant can be cut back and stored in the basement or garage keeping the soil barely moist. Large containers, which cannot be moved, must have their root balls protected from freezing. A simple way is to wrap the container very loosely with chicken wire and fill the area with leaves or mulch. Allow six inches of space all around and at the top for mulching.