

Pots & Containers



by

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design and consultation

especially for the homeowner

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Pots & Container Plantings

A Few Good Reasons To Plant In Pots And Containers:

1. Just about every one has room for a few containers - no matter the size of your yard.
2. Many plants 'show off' better in a pot. Something that may be finely detailed, and would ordinarily get lost in the garden can be showcased in a container. Succulents in particular come to mind.
3. Containers in and of themselves lend a sculptural form to the garden. Sometimes a great ceramic pot alone with nothing planted in it can make a statement.
4. Perfect soil (the kind you buy in a bag), perfect drainage, and low maintenance. Also low liability in that if something doesn't work or you change your mind, replacing a few plants in a pot is a pretty low cost investment and doesn't require much in the way of physical effort.

Types of Containers:

1. Ceramic Pots: come in a wide variety of shapes, sizes and price. Most are actually glazed clay. Because of the glaze, these pots are not as porous as terra cotta, retaining moisture a bit longer. The big advantage is the range of color available; from bright primary colors to softer earth tones. Different glazes are also available from a solid finish to beautiful multi-colored dripping glazes. Ceramic pots can be 'high fired' or 'low fired'. This is an indication of the strength and hardness of the finished pottery. A high fired pot will be much stronger, last longer and typically will be much more expensive than a 'low' fired pot.
2. Clay or Terra Cotta Pots: When using this term, I mean a clay pot that is left natural without a glaze. This type of pottery can range from simple shapes to ornate. The price varies depending on the complexity of the design and whether the pottery is high fired or low fired. Terra cotta is a porous material, therefore, although oxygen stays available to the roots of a plant, moisture evaporates quickly. As a result plants in a terra cotta pot should be watered more often.
3. Fiberglass: Fiberglass pots look and feel very much like dense plastic, however they may be painted to look like glazed ceramics, stone or different materials with a good degree of accuracy. They take paint very well and can appear authentic. Fiberglass is considerably more durable and long lasting than regular plastic. It will not be given to cracking and breaking as regular plastic might. Fiberglass is also lightweight making it the best pick and excellent choice in spaces where a homeowner might wish to move planters around occasionally.
4. Plastic- Resin: Relatively inexpensive, and light weight. Plastic has come a long way, some of the new plastic-resin pots look like ceramic until you touch them. They hold water longer than clay or ceramic - which may or may not be a good thing. Good sufficient drainage is essential to the health of your plants so make sure you have drain holes and the pot is elevated.
5. Hanging Baskets: Most often when I think of a hanging basket it is a wire frame wrapped with Sphagnum Moss or lined with a Cocoa Fiber material that comes in a mat. These baskets can be used over and over with the re-application of the moss or the cocoa fiber lining. These will definitely need frequent watering as they dry out rapidly and since they hang, all sides are exposed to the air and drying winds.

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The How To:

1. Selecting a container or pot: Think about the style of your house - is it Traditional, Mediterranean or Southwestern? A few other things to think about: darker colored or black pots will get very hot if they are placed in a sunny location - avoid that. Will you be moving the container? If so, consider a lighter weight plastic or fiberglass. What will you be growing in the container? If the answer is vegetables make sure you give the plant enough room. A regular old plastic 5 gallon utility bucket from the hardware store works great, make sure to drill plenty of drainage holes in the bottom. The recommended sizes for container grown vegetables are as follows:

▪ Beans, snap	3 to 5 gal
▪ Beets	2 to 3 gal
▪ Cucumbers	3 to 5 gal
▪ Egg Plant	5 gal
▪ Lettuce/salad greens	1 to 3 gal
▪ Onions, green	1 to 3 gal
▪ Peppers	3 to 5 gal
▪ Radishes	1 gal
▪ Squash summer	5 gal
▪ Tomatoes	5 gal
2. Drainage: Once you have selected the appropriate container for your plant, you need to ensure adequate drainage. Most plants will rot if they are left standing in water - the exception being bog plants that like having wet feet. Most purchased pots have drain holes already. If these holes are very large you can cover the hole with pieces of broken pottery or screening so that the soil will not run out when the container is watered - just make sure you do not clog the hole. Also raise the pot up of the ground. This can be done with fancy pot "feet" or pieces of tile or brick - anything to keep it off the ground and allow water to drain away. If the pot is made of plastic or fiberglass this is especially important. A word about saucers - these are intended to keep the pot from staining a patio surface, and while they work - sort of - they can also work against you. If they are continually full of water the pot will be continually wet. I prefer to locate pots and containers right in the planter areas - I think it looks better and it takes care of the problem of staining tile, wood or concrete surfaces.
3. Soil - growing mediums: Do not use soil from your garden. It is too heavy for container planting. A good high quality potting soil is best. Most of the bagged goods will say potting soil. Also the addition of moisture polymers can be helpful. These little gizmos look like large crystals of salt when they are dry in the package, but once they are exposed to water they fill up and look like little cubes of jello. The idea being that they can hold moisture and release it to the plants.

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4. Irrigating – watering: Generally speaking, potted plants require regular water. Of course this can be done by hand with a hose, but what happens when you leave for the weekend in August... Unless you have a devoted plant sitter, it is a great idea to put your pots and containers on an automatic valve. This could be added to an existing irrigation timer if you have a station open. It can also be done with a battery valve. I have used the Dig brand battery valve for years and I find them very dependable. They range in cost between \$60 to \$80. They operate on a 9vt battery. If you have your system set up on a valve, use drip irrigation tubing and emitters or sprayers. I have tried many combinations over the years; this is what works best for me:

- Micro Spray - for anything multi floral, meaning you want to plant a bunch of different things out of 6 packs, 4" pots or 1 gallon containers. Like petunias, lobelia, marigolds etc. I have found that the little micro-spray get everything wet, whereas trying to put emitters to each plant is just way too fussy, plus potting soil tends to not absorb water as well as regular garden soil and emitters can drill a water path right past a small root ball leaving the plant dry.
- Emitters: Another easy effective way to irrigate a pot is to use only one or maybe 2 larger plants. This allows you to use a single emitter right at the root ball of the plant. Typically the plants need to be at least a size of 4" or 1 gallon.



5. Fertilizing – Plants in pots need regular fertilizing to do their best. A water soluble type such as Peters 20-20-20 or Miracle Grow works well. Follow directions on the package.
6. Habitat: yes that is right - you can create a container planting that attracts hummingbirds or butterflies, or both. Use plants that have tubular forms for hummingbirds. Penstemons and Salvias are a sure bet. For adult butterflies, Verbenas, Lantana, Pentas & Dwarf Buddleia will work well. Try building a hanging basket with things that attract hummingbirds rather than a sugar water feeder – it is prettier, easier and better for the birds.

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A Few Design Tips

1. **Composition: Thrillers, fillers and spillers:** This is an easy way to describe a way of planting a container that will be visually exciting. The thriller is an upright growing plant, such as an ornamental grass – something with a strong vertical line and some texture. The filler is a mounding plant that has a more spreading habit with stems that tend to grow up and then starts to trail. A spiller is a trailing plant that will spill over the edge of the container. A plant list that tells you who is who follows on the next page.
2. **Go Solo:** Simple plantings can also work well – just put one great plant in a pot and let it happen. Usually the “Thrillers” make great single subjects. Also anything that is finely detailed is better appreciated ‘solo’. Think about elevating some of the finer detailed plants in a taller pot. Many succulents fall into this category.
3. **Color:** Color is the one thing that can really pull a design together. Here a few ideas or ‘recipes’. The great thing about containers and pots is that you can switch out the themes and have a ball playing with color combinations & ideas.
 - ❑ *Monochromatic schemes:* One color – simple. Classic, white gardens are elegant and timeless. An entire container done in shades of green will cool down a hot and tired patio. You can expand on this and add another color – deep red and white in a formal garden is gorgeous.
 - ❑ *Pastel Palette:* These colors tend to be in the cool range – the color of the sky, water, ice. The result is calming. Blue, Purple (all shades from lightest lavender to deep purple), Pink, and White. There is an absence of orange, red and yellow influence (warm colors).
 - ❑ *Hot Colors:* These colors are warm, the color of the sun and fire, they have a lot of energy. The combination I like is: Yellow, Orange, Red, Purple, Blue, and White.
 - ❑ *Complementary Colors:* These are colors that are opposite each other on the color wheel, they are: Blue & Orange, Yellow & Purple, Green & Red. They tend to make each other ‘pop’.
 - ❑ *Analogous color schemes:* these would be colors that are closely related; neighbors on the color wheel. An example would be pale shades of apricot, darker coral, thru deep bronze. Or the palest shade of lavender blue, to a true blue, through a deep purple. If you go with darker colors keep in mind you may want to add a touch of white.
 - ❑ *White:* A word about white – use it – plenty of it, especially if you want a colorful garden. The reason: white clarifies and intensifies the colors next to it. A lack of white in an otherwise colorful garden will result in a dull effect – add white here and there for ‘sparkle’. Light gray foliage also counts as ‘white’. The advantage there is that foliage plants don’t have a bloom period – that foliage is always going to be there. Many gray foliage plants also provide a velvety texture: that gray or silver color is often tiny little hairs on the surface of the leaf. Silver or gray plants have the advantage of being more drought tolerant as well.