

Four Keys to Successful Container Gardening

Contact: Diane Relf, Extension Specialist, Environmental Horticulture

April 28, 1997

If you as a gardener do four things right, your container garden will give you spectacular success: select the right container, use the proper soil, select the right plant for your site, and use simple maintenance procedures.

Select Right Container

A good container should be large enough to provide room for soil and roots, have sufficient head room for proper watering, provide bottom drainage, and be attractive without competing with the plant it holds.

Drainage holes are the secret to success by making sure the plant never stands in wet soil. Roots require air space in the soil to live. If the desired container does not have drainage holes, consider growing the plant in another container, perhaps a plastic pot, and displaying it in the more attractive container.

Size and appearance of the container should be in visual proportion to the plants grown in it and the setting where it is used. Avoid excessively heavy containers on balconies and display shelves. The container should also be of a compatible color and design or style for the setting where it is to be used.

Use the Proper Soil

The potting soil, or medium in which a plant grows, must be of good quality. It should be porous for root aeration and drainage, but also capable of water and nutrient retention. Most commercially prepared mixes are termed artificial, which means they contain no soil; therefore, no insects, diseases, or weeds.

Select the Right Plant

Trees, shrubs, flowers, vegetables, and herbs do well in containers. The important thing to remember is that growing a plant in a container does not change its basic light or moisture requirements. Sun-loving plants still need to be in full sun.

Growing plants together that have the same light and moisture requirements adds interest and beauty to the container garden. Avoid mixing slow-growing and vigorous plants. Avoid selecting a plant that is too small for the container as the roots will not become established well, and the plant will never be vigorous.

Use Simple Maintenance Procedures

The most common problem with container gardens is too little or too much water. Because the volume of soil is relatively small, containers can dry out very quickly, especially on a concrete patio in full sun. Daily, or even twice daily watering may be necessary.

Learn to use your fingers to gauge the need for water, then apply enough to run through the drainage holes in the bottom of the container. This assures that the soil is thoroughly and uniformly wet and that excess salts are washed from the soil. On an upstairs balcony, this may mean neighbor problems, so make provisions for water drainage. However, **DO NOT ALLOW THE POT TO SIT IN WATER.** It will cause root damage because there will be no oxygen in the soil, and it will cause a build-up of salts that can be toxic to plants.

More gardening information is available in the [Virginia Gardener Newsletter](#).