

Container Gardening Basics

Start with the right pot . . .

SIZE: When in doubt, bigger is better. Big pots don't dry out as fast as small pots. Big pots mean more space for design possibilities. And in big pots, you have more space for a selection of plants that bloom from early to late.

DRAINAGE: Choose the right pot for the plant. Almost all plants want a pot with holes in the bottom for drainage. Only water plants or bog plants want a pot with no holes. In the sun, use clay/terra cotta (porous) pots only for succulents or very drought tolerant plants. Use plastic, foam or fiberglass (non-porous) pots for all other plants in the sun.

Then choose the right spot . . .

SHADE: To prevent drying out, always place clay pots and hanging baskets in the shade. Shade is best for them because they both lose moisture from all surfaces. Clay transpires (loses moisture) not only from the soil surface, but also right through the sides of the pot. Line hanging baskets with layers of newspaper to slow moisture loss. Don't forget that dark colored pots absorb more heat from the sun than light colored pots. Use those dark pots in the shade.

SUN: Place non-porous pots in the sun to reduce moisture loss. These include plastic, foam, fiberglass or glazed clay or terra cotta. Non-porous pots lose moisture only from the soil surface, not through the sides of the pot. Mulch the soil surface to further reduce moisture loss in the sun. Add organic matter to all pots in the sun to enhance moisture retention. ("Water Absorbing Crystals: Do they really work?", Fine Gardening, August, 2009) Light colored pots reflect heat; use them in the sun. If you have a choice, choose morning sun over afternoon sun. Morning sun dries the leaves to reduce fungal infestations and hits your pots when the air temperature is cooler instead of in the heat of the afternoon.

The dirt on soil and water . . .

SOIL: Buy a soil-less potting mix to assure good drainage and good space for air in your growing medium. Don't be confused by the term "soil less". This does not mean artificial. Soil less potting mixes are composed of organic and mineral parts such as peat moss, pine bark, sawdust, vermiculite or perlite. If you try to use soil from your yard, you'll end up with a concrete-like mass in your pot. Don't even consider it. Add organic matter/compost to the soil less mix to improve moisture retention. Remember that crowded pots are heavy feeders. Feed every two weeks or weakly, weekly.

WATERING: When you fill a pot with soil, always leave at least two inches of room between the top of the soil and the top of the pot. When you water, you can fill

this space with water and then move on to the next pot. Without that space to use, watering becomes a very slow process. Use the knuckle test to prevent over watering. Stick your finger into the soil all the way down to the second knuckle. If the tip of your finger is still in dry soil, it's time to water. Let water run freely out of the bottom of the pot to prevent buildup of salts in the pot. Don't let water stand *permanently* in the saucer under the pot. It's fine for water to stand for an hour or so. That gives the plant a chance to take up all the water it needs. But dump out the saucer after that to prevent a waterlogged root system. Check pots in sunny locations daily. They can dry out very fast. Check twice daily in July and August.

Rain is *never* enough. **Never** enough. **NEVER** enough. Got that?

Keep your wits about you when you choose . . .

COMPATIBLE POT MATES: Putting a sun lover in a pot with a shade lover guarantees that one of them will not thrive. Four or five shade lovers will be very happy together in that clay pot in that shady spot. Four or five sun lovers will be very happy together in that BIG fiberglass pot in that sunny spot.

Read the label for information about moisture requirements. Don't place a succulent in the same pot with something that's looking for "evenly moist" soil.

When you plant, take into account the plant's size at the end of the summer, not the size it is today. The plant label will tell you.

DESIGN DICTATES CHOICE: Think about design when you select plants. Sounds obvious? Easy? If it were obvious, we would never come home with a bunch of plants that end up looking like mush together. And most of us have done that. There are many great designs, but you need to have one. One great design is the "up, out and down", also called the "thriller, filler and spiller". You can also have a single plant or single focal point. Take the gardening magazine with you with that great article on container design. It takes discipline and intention to choose for design, but the payoff is big.

UNUSUAL PLANTS FOR CONTAINERS: Annuals and tropicals tend to be our first thought when choosing plants for containers. But don't forget about perennials and even small shrubs or small trees, then winter them over in an unheated garage, right in the pot. Lettuces and cabbages are beautiful in pots and can be moved from sun to shade, as the weather gets warmer. After you eat the lettuce fill the pot with hot weather plants like caladiums or cannas.

For more information on container gardening . . .

www.extension.missouri.edu/explore/agguides/hort/ (University of MO Extension)
www.mobot.org/gardeninghelp/plantfinder/factsheet.asp?code=13 (Missouri Botanical Garden)

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