

Outdoor Container Gardening

Choose any container you like, for the place you have in mind, as long as it has adequate drainage, holds enough soil and is large enough to support your plants when they are mature. You will see a wide selection at your local garden center, or you may use found objects. Here are a few things to keep in mind when you make your selection:

Terra-cotta is heavy and porous. These containers will likely need frequent watering and must have a frost free storage area for the winter, or they will crack.

Wood that is not cedar or redwood must be painted, coated with a non-toxic preservative, charred on the inside and/or lined with plastic or it will rot in a few seasons. Treated wood is not recommended for vegetable gardening.

Plastic is lightweight, durable and may be left outside, but is not biodegradable. Self-watering plastic pots in a number of styles are available.

Potting soil should contain both organic and mineral material. You may use a commercial soilless mix from your local garden center for non-permanent plantings and for plantings where weight is a consideration. A soil based mix should be used for permanent plantings, but may also be used for most seasonal plantings. If you would like to mix your own growing medium, there are some suggestions at the end of this flyer.

Design Considerations

If the display is to be viewed from all sides, you may start with a plant for vertical emphasis in the center (this may be tall or spiky). If the display is against a wall, position the tallest plants in the back. Shorter (filler) plants are set around the vertical specimen, followed by smaller (edging) plants toward the rim. At the rim of the pot, you may want to include trailing plants. Edging and trailing plants may be mixed together at the rim to good effect. You can create a pleasing design with one plant or many layers of plant types and varieties. If you mix plants, choose those that have similar cultural needs.

Odd numbers of plants usually look more natural. Think about how the size, colors, textures and shapes will interact in your display as you choose your plants. Consider the differences between complementary, contrasting or echoing colors, leaf and flower shapes. Do not crowd the containers. Your plants will fill the containers quickly, especially if you are growing annual flowers or vegetables.

Planting and Maintenance

Place large empty containers in their final location, or on casters, because they will be heavy when filled. Cover the hole in the bottom with a porous material such as a piece of window screening or a paper coffee filter cut to size. If there is no hole, do not use the pot for terrestrial plants unless they prefer saturated soil (watercress or mint, for example); plant a water garden instead.

Fill your container about three-quarters full with moist soil. If the container is very large, add soil in layers and water each layer before adding the next. To plant, start in the middle with your accent plant, work around it with your filler plants; finally, add your edging and trailing plants. If you use a one-inch layer of mulch (recommended), the top layer of soil should be about two inches below the rim of your pot. If you decide not to mulch, leave enough room between the rim and the soil to facilitate watering (approximately one inch). The contents will settle over time.

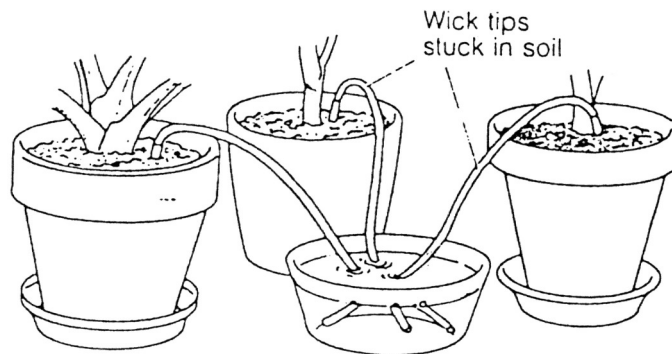
As your plants grow, prune them to keep them looking full and to maintain your design. Dead-head spent annual flowers to encourage repeat blooming. Harvest vegetables regularly for better production. At the end of the growing season, compost all healthy plant material.

Your potting mix may be reused for several seasons. Add some composted material to it each year to replenish lost organic matter. Cultivate the mix to loosen it and allow air to penetrate the soil before replanting.

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Watering

After planting, water thoroughly. Check your containers at least once daily; preferably two to three times per day during a hot, dry summer. When the top inch or two of soil is dry, add water. Each time you water, you should use an amount sufficient to cause water to drain out of the hole in the bottom. Add water slowly, or in increments, so it does not quickly run off. Drip watering systems and other work-saving watering aids are available at your garden center.



Vacation Watering

Wet the wicks, or capillary matting material, cut in strips, and place one end in the bottom of the reservoir. Press the other end into the soil. Water the plants to establish capillary action and fill the reservoir.

Vacation Watering

If you have a watering system, program it to activate once or twice a day, depending on weather forecasts. Use a rain sensor to avoid over-watering. If you do not have a watering system, place your containers close together in a shaded area. Fill reservoirs of self-watering pots. Water other containers thoroughly and mulch the soil surface. A simple wick system is pictured at right. Local garden centers also carry vacation watering aids.

Fertilizing

Since containers are watered regularly, routine applications of fertilizer are necessary to replace nutrients that are leached away. Below are some choices:

| Synthetic Fertilizers | Organic Fertilizers |
|--|--|
| <p><u>Timed-release</u> Timed-release granules may last many months. One application may be sufficient for plants with low nutrient needs. Follow label directions carefully. If over applied, timed-release products may release more fertilizer than necessary (resulting in fertilizer burn) in very hot weather.</p> | <p><u>Slow release</u> Commercial mixes may last up to three months and may be supplemented after that, if necessary.</p> |
| <p><u>Water soluble fertilizer</u> These may be diluted at various rates: ▲One-fifth of the recommended amount used every other watering, for soilless mixes of peat moss and vermiculite. ▲One-half of the recommended amount, used once each week, for soilless mixes with added compost or wood bark. ▲Full strength for soil mixes, as directed on product label.</p> | <p><u>Liquid organic fertilizer</u> Products such as fish emulsion, or fish and kelp fertilizer may be mixed in the same proportions as the water soluble fertilizers, left. These products often produce considerable odors.</p> |

Potting Mix

| Mix for Herbs | Mix for Vegetables | Mix for Ornamentals |
|---|--|--|
| 1 part compost 1 part milled sphagnum moss 2 parts sharp (builder's) sand (for angelica and lovage add up to 1 part vermiculite) | 5 parts compost 1 part sharp (builder's) sand 1 part vermiculite or perlite 1 part milled sphagnum moss | 2 parts garden soil 2 parts compost 1 part sharp (builder's) sand 1 part vermiculite or perlite |

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The information on pest management for New York State contained in this publication is dated January 2010. The user is responsible for obtaining the most up-to-date pest management information. Contact any Cornell Cooperative Extension county office or PMEP (<http://pmep.cce.cornell.edu/>), the Cornell Cooperative Extension pesticide information website. The information herein is no substitute for pesticide labeling. The user is solely responsible for reading and following manufacturer's labeling and instructions.