

Newspaper column:

Question:

I am not able to garden in the yard anymore and would love to garden in containers on my patio. Can you give some tips for a beginner container gardener?

Answer:

Even though you can no longer get out in the garden you can still enjoy many of the joys of gardening that you always have. Planting a container garden is much like creating a floral arrangement. It's a great way to express the artistic side of gardening. There is an added benefit of easily correcting mistakes. For instance, some mistakes can be corrected by simply moving the container a few feet to more or less light.

Choosing the right container is the first step to successful container gardening. Generally, plants can be grown in anything that will hold growing media and allow proper drainage. Some of the more traditionally used containers include terra cotta (clay) pots, plastic pots, hanging baskets, wire baskets lined with sphagnum moss or fibrous liners, concrete planters, planter boxes, whiskey barrels, 5-gallon buckets, tubs, and bushel baskets. Of course, some of these containers are more durable than others.

First, the container must have a bottom hole for adequate drainage. Second, it must be large enough to hold the minimum amount of medium required for mature plants to grow. Third, the type of container used depends on the location and the plant or plants you have selected.

The next step to successful container gardening is selecting the right growing medium. It is important to select a growing medium that drains well but that will also help keep plants from drying out between waterings. Keeping containers moist yet well drained is the most important key to successful container gardening.

The best growing mixture is one that is soilless. Soilless media are free of any disease pathogens, insect pests, and weed seeds. They are also generally lightweight and porous, allowing for a well-drained yet moisture-retentive mix. Premixed growing media for container gardens are available from garden centers.

Some commercially prepared growing mixtures have an added wetting agent which is a great help when it comes to planting and

watering. You may consider adding water-absorbing polymers or "gel" that absorbs and retains up to 400 times its weight in water. These polymers are nontoxic and last for a number of years before breaking down in the environment. Read the label carefully to understand the proper amount of polymer needed for a specific container size.

Proper fertilization and watering are also very critical for successful container gardening. Slow-release fertilizers supplying all the nutrients needed for a container garden are available. If additional fertilization is needed, a water-soluble fertilizer can be used to supplement or replace the slow release materials.

The most critical and time-consuming part of maintaining container gardens is watering. This is particularly true as plants mature and roots crowd the container. As a general rule, plants grown in full sun require thorough watering two to three times a week. Mature plants may have to be watered once or twice a day during the hot days of summer. Watering needs are quite variable depending on container(size, color, material); sun exposure; plant density and plant drought tolerance.

For more information contact the County Extension office and ask for the publication called "Container Gardening" or go to the following web address: <http://www.aces.edu/pubs/docs/A/ANR-1139>