

It's Not Too Late to Plant a Container Garden

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Container gardening is the latest aspect of a trend that isn't going away any time soon. Americans have the gardening bug. The charm of Grandmothers garden has cinched our hearts. The obligatory row of petunias down the driveway has given way to elaborate designs, mixed borders and outdoor rooms adorned with plants from ceiling to floor.

According to the National Gardening Association, consumers spent staggering \$37.7 billion on their lawns and gardens last year. That's a 13% increase or \$4.6 billion over 2000.

Container gardening is the fastest-growing category in the entire lawn and garden market with over 30 million homes planting in containers in 2001. Growing plants in containers opens up a multitude of new opportunities to garden. And people get it.

Some of Chicago's most spectacular gardens lie on the roofs of its largest buildings. Nearly every new condo and condo conversion offers balconies waiting to be adored with plants. But where does one start?

The key to doing anything well is to understand the basics. For container gardening the basics include containers, soil, water, light and a wide choice of plants. Having a grasp of the basics will make gardening in containers a simple and rewarding experience. Here's a breakdown of the basics.

Containers Any container will do provided it has the ability to release water. Water needs to be able to run through the soil in order to prevent root rot and to reduce the build-up of salts from the water. A tray can be used to catch any water, which can—and should—run through the container. Don't let it sit in the water, drain it away. Or better yet line the tray with pea gravel, which will catch the run off water and keep the plant's roots from soaking in it. This

incidentally is a great way to grow houseplants too. As the water evaporates from the gravel in the tray, it increases the humidity level around the plants.

Shopping for containers can be a lot of fun. Think outside of the box. Try using found objects like old milk pails, watering cans or troughs. Anything

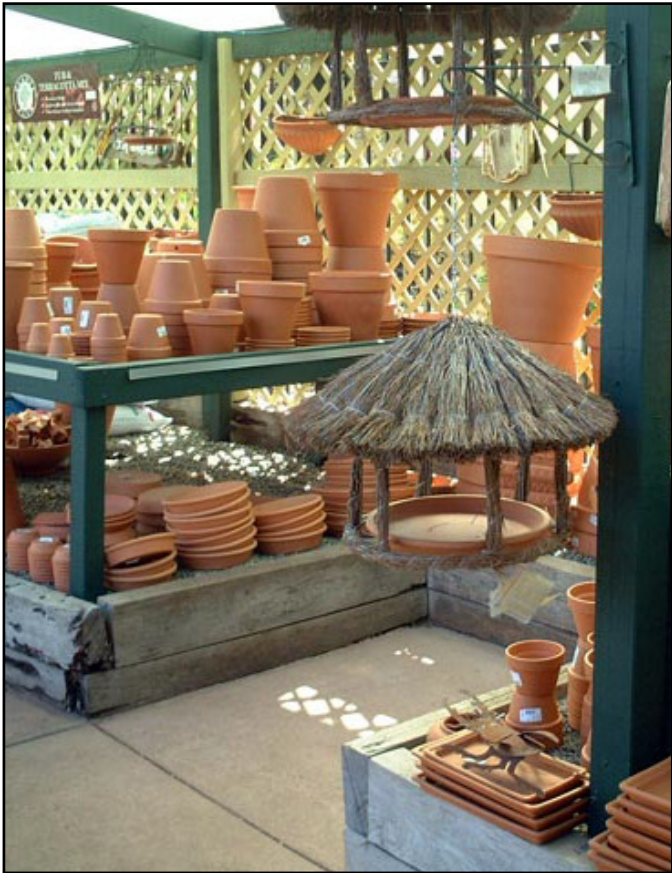


Above: This copper kettle, found at Kimball & Bean Architectural and Garden Antiques in Woodstock, accents the intersection of two paths and serves as a focal point for the adjacent patio.

that holds soil will work so long as it has holes for drainage, which you can add yourself by drilling or using a sharp object like an ice pick.

Wood makes the most versatile containers. Custom planters big enough to hold trees and shrubs can be built to line the edge of a rooftop or large balcony. These can be lined with insulation to help plants survive a Chicago winter. If you go this route be sure check with an engineer to make sure the structure will support the weight of the containers, the soil, plants and you and your guests! Chicago has an ordinance that requires this. You can check out The City of Chicago's *Guide to Rooftop Gardening* (See Sources)

For a more traditional look, terra cotta pots are a classic container choice. Terra cotta's natural beauty is simple, elegant and enhances with age, though its weight and cost can make it prohibitive. Plastic is the most common container choice. Plastic is lightweight, inexpensive and readily available.



Above: Terra cotta containers come in an infinite variety of sizes and shapes. Terra cotta pots take a backstage seat letting the plants take center stage.

Many plastic containers are molded in traditional terra cotta shapes. Both plastic and terra cotta cannot be left outside over the winter or they will be subject to cracking and breaking due to Chicago's long freeze/thaw cycle.

Carved or cast stone containers can be left outside unharmed by freezing but they are the most expensive and extremely heavy. More recent introductions are polystyrene resin pots. These have the look of aged carved stone, are lightweight and can be left outside all winter.

Soil

Attention to soil is critical. Soil is a medium for growing plants. It must be able to simultaneously

hold water and drain well to provide oxygen to the roots. (Plant roots consume oxygen in the process of respiration—the opposite of photosynthesis in leaves where oxygen is produced!) Good potting is nothing like dirt. In fact, you want to avoid the stuff you dig up from the garden. Garden soil can carry disease and is too heavy in both consistency and weight. For container gardening, use a soil-less mix.

Soilless mixes, made of varying combinations of peat moss and perlite or vermiculite, are available at any garden center or grocery store. The medium is packed dry to make it lightweight and since dry peat repels water, wet it down by mixing it in a large tub before planting in it. To save money buy in large quantities.

Light

For the light issue, let's divide container gardening into sun and shade gardening. Four or more hours of direct sun each day is considered full sun. Less than two hours of sun is shade. In between two and four hours is partial sun or shade. Choosing the right plant for the conditions of a given location is one of the greatest keys to success in gardening no matter where you garden. For a location that receives full sun, choose a plant that requires full sun. The same goes for shade. See side bar for a list of plants that like sun and shade.

Water

Since container gardens are disconnected from the earth's natural water table, watering is especially important. Watering will likely be needed every other day for the first month or so. After that watering will become a daily routine. If you go in vacation, plan on having someone come by to do the watering.

Alternatively, if you have a lot of containers, install a drip irrigation system. Kits are available for this and many irrigation contractors are trained for this type of installation. Drip irrigation is a must for built-in planter boxes on rooftops. Most contractors will not install a rooftop garden without one.

Plants

The array of plants to choose from today is mind boggling. It's the kind of selection that makes people hold up their thumb baring testament to its lack of

greenness. Nobody has a green thumb—it's all about the basics.

Having determined the number of hours of direct sunlight a given location will receive, it's easy to zero in on the plants you have to choose from. Whether you're choosing from sun or shade loving plants, it's time to start designing.



Above: This simple combination of three plants from Proven Winners makes a big impact. The three plants each take on different rolls: the Coleus Amora grows upright while the Goldflake® Mecardonia trails and the Calibrachoa Superbells® Red fills in the middle.

For a knockout container planting limit your selection to no more three different plants per container. Stick to annual plants or what the industry calls temperennials—plants that would grow all year round in say, Florida, but perish in our winters. These kinds of plants tend to provide color all season long. Choose contrasting or complementing colors and textures. This is a personal choice and does not affect plant health. Have fun with it.

Of the three plant types, pick one that is tall and

upright, one that will tend to trail, and one that is of medium height between the other two. Depending on the size of the container plant as many of each of the three kinds of plants as you will need. Keeping them in groups will give a much stronger visual punch than mixing them up. For example plant three groups of three varieties rather than nine different varieties.

One trick that professionals use to make a container planting look absolutely smashing from the day it is planted to the first hard frost is to pack all the plants into the container as closely as they will fit. Then water and fertilize regularly with a water soluble fertilizer like Peters or Miracle Grow. Remove spent flowers to encourage new ones and before you know it people will be accusing you of having one of those green thumbs!

Sources

Proven Winners

www.provenwinners.com

Smith and Hwken

www.smithandhawken.com

Kimball & Bean Architectural and Garden Antiques

3606 S. Country Club Road, Woodstock, IL 60098

www.kimballandbean.com

City of Chicago's *Guide to Rooftop Gardening*

[http://egov.cityofchicago.org/webportal/](http://egov.cityofchicago.org/webportal/COCWebPortal/COC_ATTACH/GuidetoRooftopGardening_v2.pdf)

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