



HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY OF NSW

FACT SHEET 4

GARDENING WITH CONTAINERS

What is container gardening?

A container is anything that holds soil & is large enough to support the growth of a plant.

Using containers for growing plants is the easiest way to start a garden. Containers are an excellent way to garden because they bring the soil and plants to within easy reach. Additionally containers are valuable wherever ground level garden beds are not feasible (e.g. flats with balconies, indoors, or where the soil quality is poor).

Containers are essentially small raised garden beds. They may be small, or very large and heavy, wide & deep enough to support the growth of a small tree.

Several containers of different heights can be pleasingly clustered together. Alternatively, rows of containers can give your garden a defined geometric look. Large containers help to create clearly defined garden areas, and are useful for gardeners who are visually impaired.

Containers come in a huge variety of materials, colours, sizes, textures. Items made for other purposes can be re-invented as containers, provided that drainage holes are made in the base.

Factors to consider when choosing containers:

- Accessibility: Ensure your containers are accessible. Containers should be at a height that can be easily reached so that the gardener does not have to strain to tend the plants. The width of a container should be such that it can be reached from any side. Ensure the containers are stable & heavy enough not to tip over if bumped, or in wind, or if port.
- Ground surfaces: Ensure that your garden provides safe access to containers. Ground floor materials should be non-slip, non-reflective, level or less than 1/20 slope. Ensure there is sufficient space between containers & to allow manoeuvrability e.g. wheelchair turning space.
- Location: Consider positioning your containers so that they can be viewed from indoors. Locate containers near seating so that you can rest & enjoy your container plants.

- **Container size:** Containers come in a myriad of shapes & sizes. Large pots retain moisture for longer periods, & so are more tolerant of occasional neglect. Also, large pots allow for root growth as plants mature. Large containers are more stable, and can be leaned upon for support without tipping over. Best of all, large containers can provide a home for a variety of plants.

Small pots dry out more quickly than large ones and require more frequent watering. However, small pots and window boxes are lighter and can be bracketed to walls, or suspended from overhead structures (eaves, pergolas).

Ensure all containers have access to water, by hose or a watering can.

- **Plants for containers:** First ensure the plant is suitable for growing in a container. Match the environment of the container with the plant's requirements e.g. plants that thrive in moist shady conditions will grow well in a container in the shade, while sun-loving plants that require little watering, like succulents, can survive happily in containers in the sun.

Container Material:

Containers can be made from wood, metal, ceramics, plastic, stone, concrete & terracotta, in any number of finishes. Large tubs and barrels are examples of timber containers. Recycled containers, from ceramic sewer pipes to feeding troughs, can be used, provided drainage at the base is adequate. Use containers that will survive being in contact with moist soil, exposure to sun & frost. Select durable containers that will not disintegrate. Avoid timber which rots. Ensure that treated timber is not toxic.

- **Container Weight:** The weight of the container (soil plus plant) is an important factor to consider; even lightweight containers can be heavy when filled with soil. Lightweight containers (e.g. plastic) are easier to move around (e.g. as seasons & sunshine dictate). Weight is an important consideration on balconies & rooftop gardens e.g. large concrete containers may be unsuitable. However, small light-weight containers that are easily tipped over may also be a nuisance & a trip hazard.
- **Drainage:** All plant containers need holes in their base to allow drainage. If water cannot escape, the roots will rot & the plant will die. The only exception is aquatic plants.
- **Soil:** Use a light weight soil or growing medium to fill the container. Add water crystals to assist moisture retention. Mulch the soil surface to reduce moisture loss, suppress weed growth & improve soil structure. Organic (e.g. leaf litter, wood chips) or inorganic (e.g. pebbles) may be used as a mulch.
- **Saucers:** place a drip collector under containers to prevent the potting mix drying out between watering and becoming water repellent.

Table Planters:

Another type of container is the table planter. This consists of a shallow soil-filled tray supported on legs. The advantage of the table planter is that it provides around 300mm+ clearance for gardeners using wheelchairs. The table height can be customised. The soil depth should be a minimum of 120 mm.

Select plants suitable for the soil depth and sun/shade conditions. Plants that prefer well-drained soil, tolerating low soil moisture are an excellent choice. Trailing plants look wonderful cascading over the edge of the planter. Since the shallow container dries out quickly in full sun, mulch the soil and add water crystals to the soil to minimise dehydration. Frequent watering, or a drip watering system is required.

The width of the table should not exceed what can be reached. For a free standing table to be accessible on both sides, it should be no wider than about 1200mm. If the table is accessible on one side only, then its width should not exceed around 600mm.

Related Links:

Use Internet search engines with the key words: enabling garden, healing garden, accessible garden, horticultural therapy, and barrier-free gardening, etc., to identify links to many different resources related to gardening for people with disabilities. Some interesting & helpful sites are listed below.

- Australian Society for Growing Native Plants.
<http://asgap.org.au>
- Garden Forever
<http://www.gardenforever.com>
* Many wonderful links for gardeners with disabilities, arthritis, allergies.
- Gardening for Good
<http://www.carryongardening.org.uk>
* Great site with suggestions for gardeners.
- Horticultural Therapy and Therapeutic Recreation Information
www.horticulturaltherapy.info
- Guelph Enabling Garden
www.enablinggarden.org