Container Gardening with Fruit

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Where Does Your Garden Grow?

Container gardening allows you to move your garden where you want it. If you live in an apartment or condo, enjoy container gardens on decks or secured to window ledges. Consider mixing vegetables, fruit and flowers. Your growing season can be extended while you tuck pots into every nook and cranny you'd like to transform into garden space.

The container's size and composition are important. Your selected container must accommodate growing plant roots. Fiber and plastic containers are lightweight, but deteriorate quickly. Small clay pots can dry out rapidly. Glazed ceramic pots are a better choice, but large clay pots can be very heavy. Can your deck or patio support the weight of a 15 - 30 gallon container with moist soil and a growing dwarf tree? Keep in mind that dark colored pots absorb more heat than light-colored pots and plant accordingly.

All containers need adequate drainage holes so that the plant roots do not soak in water trapped in the bottom of the pot. To prevent soil from leaking out of the drainage holes, you can line the bottom of the container with newspaper. Place containers on bricks or blocks to allow water to drain and to maintain airflow. Using a saucer under a container will collect water and promote overwatering and root rot.

It is important that the planting medium you use will allow water to drain rapidly, but retain enough moisture to keep the roots moist. Avoid using garden soil in containers – it is too heavy and may contain bacteria or other harmful organisms. You can by potting soil or create your own soil-less potting mixture (see InfoBox.)

Before putting plants in, thoroughly moisten the potting soil that you will use to fill your container. Remember to leave about two inches between the top of the soil and the top of the container so that mulch can be added.

Potted plants may need be fertilized to increase the nutrients available to them. If you use a potting soil with no added fertilizer, mix it in as you fill the pot. Dispersing the fertilizer avoids burning tender young root feeders. Slow-release or timed -release granule fertilizer can be added in future to both tree and berry pots when the plant flowers, and again when the fruit forms.

Heat and wind draw moisture from both plant and pot. During a hot spell, be prepared to water both early morning and late at night. Move your pots into the shade, or create shade for your plants. Install drip irrigation, mulch heavily with organic chipped or shredded bark, compost, lawn clippings, leafmold, gravel or pine needles for acid-loving plants.

Trellis support will give vining plants such as cucumbers, grapes, and tomatoes a place to grow. Pumpkins and melons will spill out of the pot; you can place a plastic lid under each fruit to protect from rot and insect intrusions.

Try planting vegetables in combination with Black-eyed Susans, coreopsis, sunflowers, dill, fennel, violas, lovage, and yarrow.

Consider planting fast and slow growing crops together:

- chives or bunching onions around broccoli,
- brussels sprouts and radishes around pole beans and onions,
- tomatoes with carrots, nasturtiums, parsley or onions;
- lettuce with carrots, cucumbers, onions, radishes, chives, garlic, or strawberries.

Small fruit in containers can also be grown in combinations. Try pairing currants with alpine strawberries and high bush blueberries with ground cover cherries.

Do you dream of picking fruit from your potted tree? It is possible to grow a fruit tree in a (very large) container – only if it is a true dwarf tree. Virtually every fruit tree, but not every variety, is available on dwarf (M27) rootstock. Choose a 15-gallon pot or a 24 x 36 inch box. When planting, drop two slow release fertilizer tablets into the bottom quarter of the container, or fertilize every two weeks with 10-10-10 fertilizer, diluted to half strength. Prune 1/3 of the branches to reduce the demand for water and nutrients from the young root system. Potted fruit trees can be moved to receive the necessary six hours of sun and, unlike garden planted fruit trees, cannot be over-watered.

Think of the many possibilities you have for places to plant your container garden. Perhaps that old grill, feed trough, or abandoned canoe can be converted to grow a blooming harvest.

SOILLESS MIX RECIPES FOR SPECIFIC PLANT GROUPS:

- Basic soil-less formula: two parts vermiculite, two parts, perlite and one part coco coir (a sustainable substitute for peat moss.) If weight limitation is not a consideration, add humus and sand.
- For a ten gallon vegetable potting mix five gallons of mature compost (commercial or homemade), one gallon sharp (coarse building) sand, one gallon vermiculite or perlite, one gallon coco coir, plus one cup of 5-10-10 fertilizer.
- A dwarf fruit tree requires one cubic yard of potting mix. Combine and mix well: nine cubic feet sphagnum peat moss, nine cubic feet fine sand, nine cubic feet ground pine or fir bark, five pounds of 5-10-10 dry fertilizer containing chelated elements, one pound iron sulfate, and five pounds dolomite lime.
- Berries need a humus-rich mix. Currants, raspberries, gooseberries, and blackberries prefer a slightly acidic soil, pH.5.5-6. For berries: two parts coco coir, one part ground fir bark, one part well-rotted (composted) manure, one part sharp sand. For blueberries, increase the ratio of coco coir to three parts.
- Measurements: One cubic yard = 27 cubic feet. One cubic foot=7.5 gallons. One cubic yard=202.5 gallons.