



Container Gardening

Why to grow in containers, the pros and cons of different containers and how to get started.

By Kelsey Detter

The dream of almost every garden enthusiast is to have a picturesque and editorial ready outdoor space, lush green, bounding flowers, and fresh garden produce ready to pick and eat. As gardeners we spend labor intensive weekends, hours of planning, prepping, planting and fine-tuning in order to make this dream a reality. The end goal is to create a sanctuary, our own Garden of Eden, and happy place for ourselves, and our friends, and family to enjoy. Creating this dreamscape isn't always practical or obtainable. Physical limitations, lack of property on which to establish a garden, or a non-permanent residence, all serve as barriers for the green-thumbed dreamer who feels stuck without. The solution? Container gardens! With the ability to bring the earth to a rooftop, balcony, rental property, or moving home, these types of gardens have been growing in popularity with the urban crowd, the non-permeant resident, the physically limited, and the gardening newbie. The

new gardener will benefit from the increased ability to control the soil type, quality, and nutrients, as well as the other variables such as amount of watering, and the available mobility to correct for changing sun availability. The physically limited may choose to have taller containers in order to increase plant access without the stress of bending and kneeling. In addition, all will love the ability to create a lush atmosphere through container grouping and styling on areas once devoid of the life and character plants bring.

Choose your container carefully

The wide availability of container variety can be overwhelming. By knowing the pros and cons of the materials, one can more easily choose the type that suits their individual needs and priorities.

Plastic: These containers are very easy to find at your local hardware store. With a price that is significantly cheaper than most alternatives, along with the variety of colors, shapes, and sizes, these types of containers are a very good choice for those on a tight budget or looking for a light-weight and mobile alternative to other materials. The non-porous material also makes watering a bit less frequent as they do not tend to dry out or trap heat of the summer sun. The downside to these containers, you may ask? They can look cheap, be too thin and become brittle, or break easily. These factors, coupled with the wind and strong rains that Oklahoma is known for (especially in the spring) can cause them to blow over more easily and scatter your contents to the wind. It is important to also note that, due to the lightweight and thin material, your plants will be more susceptible to frost or cold and perennials may not over-winter without being moved indoors. Warning: if plastic pots will be outdoors in an uncovered area, ensure that the design includes a drainage hole at the bottom. With the Oklahoma heavy rains we have, not having a drainage hole is a



Get creative by up-cycling for containers. (Caution: Be sure edible crops are grown in up-cycled containers that do NOT contain lead paint)

great way to drown your plants plus it's a breeding ground for the terrible state bird . . . the mosquito.

Terra-cotta: With a price slightly higher than plastic, but still reasonable and easy to find, terra-cotta is a good choice, especially for those who wish to have an 'Arizona' ascetic to their space. The material is more dense and, thus, less likely to be blown over. The cons, again you ask? Terra-cotta is extremely porous and the soil will dry out quickly, thus requiring more frequent watering and more attention. Also, it isn't recommended for plants who like "wet feet", such as hydrangeas. However, these pots are ideal for desert plants like succulents and rosemary. Note: hardware stores do sell terra-cotta sealer. It will give a slightly glazed sheen and it will bind up some of the pores of the terra-cotta, thus resulting in a slightly better water retention for your soil.

Glazed: Glazed clay pots come in a variety of shapes, designs, and colors. They are truly authentic. One can occasionally find great deals at local home stores, big box stores and, sometimes, nurseries. These pots are typically frost resistant and maintain the moisture of the soil well. The snag, again you ask? Prices can be very expensive and, once they are full, the movability is limited, especially with larger pots.

Metal: A quick search of Pinterest will show many unique ways to use metal as quick, cheap and mobile garden beds. A stock tank can be purchased at a relatively cheap price from a farm and supply store, and provides a large and easily accessible bed for a garden, not to mention a large root area for deeper rooting plants. For renters and those who wish to have a garden in a non-permanent location, these are a great option. Note that in order for these to be moved the soil must be removed. So, having a place to scatter the soil is vital for effective transportation. The height of such a tank can also be a potential disadvantage as the strong winds and storms can affect these taller plants more readily. As such, it might be

prudent to deeply stake or cage any tall growing plants such as tomatoes. Another drawback? The Oklahoma sun. While this metal is great at absorbing the heat from the sun and keeping the internal soil warm, the reflective properties will likely make it extremely hot when in full and direct sun.

Other materials such as wood, concrete and fiberglass are also readily available and are also good options. Fully researching the upsides and downsides, and potential maintenance, especially in regards to wood, is recommended before fully committing to a plan.

Soil and Water

Soil type and quality is always a huge factor when planting and gardening. While one is able to better and more readily control the soil factors while in containers (such as pH and nutrient values), it is vital to be aware of the potential drawbacks and common mistakes. Talking to an associate at a local nursery will ensure the best results in regards to the soil choice for the desired plants. **Caution:** never use dirt from your yard to fill your containers. This is a mistake made by many new gardeners. It can create a headache of consequences, including introducing insects, grass, and weeds into your controlled container. While not all insects are harmful, the risk of adding those who are harmful into an isolated area can be catastrophic to your end result. You are essentially taking these harmful insects and other soil contaminants and containing them, thus generating a restricted breeding and feeding ground for them to thrive.

Watering your container gardens will depend on the type of plants, container and soil which one chooses. A good general rule of thumb is to insert a finger about two inches into the soil. If your finger comes out with moist soil, no need to water; if it comes out clean or with dry soil, it's time to give it a good drink.

Water meters are relatively cheap and can be great for those who have a tendency to over or under water.

Container gardens are beautiful, practical and great for both the experienced as well as new gardeners. Choosing your pots, arranging to create a stylized atmosphere, and having garden space where there once was none is a real plus in addition to the joy, fresh foods, flowers and connectivity to the earth. All of these factors combine to make gardening in pots and containers a wonderful and fun experience. Try it!