

Choosing Soil for Container Gardening

From forcing bulbs to growing houseplants to cultivating urban veggie gardens, container gardening has earned some well-deserved attention in recent years. And understandably...as container gardening offers flexibility and variety in plant material selections, beautiful and creative container choices and space-saving benefits.

The needs of container plants are the same as those in the garden: optimal air, water, light and soil. To be more specific, great soil provides the following for a plant:

- Anchored support for the root system and the above ground tissue
- Ability to retain moisture (balanced well with good drainage!)
- Low risk for disease and insect infestation
- Loose texture to promote proper drainage, healthy root growth, and oxygen and nutrient uptake

So if this is the case, then why is potting soil required for my container and houseplants? Can't I just grab some dirt from the garden, throw it in a pot...it's all the same, right? Will my plants really know the difference?

First of all, technically speaking, "potting soil" is not soil, it is an artificial mixed media, often absent of actual soil components, designed for optimum growth of containerized plants.

In the confined space of a container, a plant's resources are extremely limited. So yes, they can tell the difference between garden soil and a potting medium. They know.

The Dirty Truth

So why is regular soil bad for container plants? Soil from the garden is heavier, will often not drain well, causing compaction...which negatively affects water, nutrient uptake and root health - essentially starving, or in some instances, toxifying the plant. Additionally, microorganisms, weed seeds and insects present in garden soil could introduce a biological imbalance, which sterilized potting medium preempts. Nothing attracts disease and insects better than a declining plant.

Without proper potting media, you've actually signed your plant's death warrant...and that is really not the point of gardening. We want our plants to live and thrive!

So hopefully you're convinced that potting media is your best option for container planting. But the question still remains...if it's not soil, what is it anyway?

Common Potting Media Ingredients

Recipes for potting media actually vary as much as the plants we put in them. But for the most part, the following can be found in most commercial mixes:

- Sphagnum peat moss (for moisture retention, texture, improved drainage)
- Vermiculite or perlite (for aeration and texture)
- Aged bark and/or ground fiber (water retention and drainage)

When selecting potting media, consider the moisture needs of your plant. If it is an indoor tropical, a mix with greater moisture-conserving peat might be best. If an outdoor perennial, choose a coarser, well-draining mix with a greater percentage of bark, perlite or sand. Some mixes can address the pH preferences of your plant (alkaline or acid-loving) as well.

You've selected your favorite plant, the coolest container, the appropriate location, the best conditions...so take that extra step and use the best media - one appropriate for container planting - and watch it grow healthy and strong!

[HLA-6706: Containers and Media for the Nursery](#)
[University of Illinois Extension: Container Gardens](#)