



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Container Gardening: The Basics (January 14, 2023)

by Nancy Hawkins, Tulare/Kings Counties Master Gardener

On a cool day in late spring, I wandered in my backyard and counted 35 planted containers! I had collected the containers: large, medium, and small, from thrift stores, friends, and garden shops. They were in various shapes and colors. And, of course, when planted, every container showcased plants I was interested in at the time. Several of the containers had been planted five or more years ago and were looking rather tired, and some even had roots growing through the drainage hole! Others no longer served their purpose in highlighting a special plant or theme. Several containers were cracked or broken. And keeping them watered in our hot, dry summers was getting harder. In my quest to revitalize and reduce the number of containers, I spent some hours researching container gardening.

Container gardening allows you to create special gardens to fit any situation. Plants in containers are showing up everywhere, from the front porches to rooftops and window sills to backyard patios. Containers can be used to provide focal points, divide spaces, create privacy, and objectionable screen views, accent the landscape, or grow tasty herbs, fruits, and vegetables.

Containers can change the entire look of a landscape by providing instant color anywhere, anytime. Even when there is ample room to garden in the ground, well-placed containers can provide easy-to-achieve seasonal changes. But a good-looking, well-maintained, and long-lasting container doesn't just happen. When a few basic principles are applied, even first-time gardeners can create and maintain attention-grabbing containers.



The first thing to consider when planning a container garden is **location**. Container gardens can be placed in any size location, from a small apartment patio to a large backyard landscape. The size of your space will influence the size and number of containers. Large containers do not fit well in a small space, and vice versa. Plant selection will be determined by sun exposure in your chosen location. Containers in full sun are best suited for sun-loving plants and vegetables. Drought tolerant and California native plants work well in our area. For containers that will be indoors or in shaded areas outside, consider plants that can tolerate low to medium levels of light. Plant specifics are found on plant labels.

The importance of the **physical container** holding the plants is often overlooked. Containers come in a multitude of shapes, sizes, and materials. When it comes to choosing a container, a few things need to be considered. Plastic containers are easy to find, often inexpensive, and come in a variety of shapes and colors. But they can easily chip and crack, do not hold up well to being moved, and can tip over. Terra cotta, ceramic, and concrete containers come in lots of sizes, colors, and styles but are very heavy and difficult to move once planted. If you want to be a little more creative and add some fun to your garden, anything that will hold soil and allow drainage can be used as a container. Some ideas are old garden buckets, cooking pots, wine barrels, and even old boots.

One of the most important features of a container is its size. Small, tight spaces need smaller-sized containers, while large spaces often need a larger container to make a visual impact. Large containers can hold bigger plants, like shrubs or dwarf trees. Larger plants and/or more plants need more rooting space and therefore will require a larger container. Drainage holes are found at or near the bottom of a container. Most landscape plants need adequate drainage, as standing water can cause disease and lead to plant death. Therefore, any excess water needs a place to drain. If your container does not have holes, drill ½" holes spaced 2" apart.

The proper **potting mixture or soil** must be used when creating container gardens. Topsoil or ordinary garden soil compacts too easily and can limit the amount of water and air reaching the roots of your plants. Potting soil is specially designed for use in containers and will not compact the way garden soil does. Additionally, it tends to be lighter, making containers easier to move. Garden centers have many different types of potting mixtures suitable for the plants you are using.

Maintaining your container garden requires some work. Because container plants have very limited soil volume, proper watering and fertilizing are critical in maintaining an attractive pot throughout the year. How often you need to water a container depends on the time of the year, the location of the container, how long the container has been planted, and the type of container and plants. My containers are all drip irrigated and are connected to our yard watering system. Drip tubing connects to the main distribution line. The

tubing either goes over the edge of the pot or through the hole in the bottom. The amount of water going to each container is determined by the size and number of drip emitters in each pot. The easiest way to test for soil moisture is to poke your finger into the soil to see how moist the soil is.

A regular fertilizer program is needed to keep plants growing well and attractive all season. Again, our local nurseries have many types of fertilizers available. Always read the labels to know if you have the right fertilizer and how much and when to fertilize. Some grooming is needed to maintain an attractive container. You may need to pinch back, trim or deadhead, and even replace plants to keep your container looking its best. Containers can be reused from year to year. If you plan to reuse a container for new planting, remove any old plant debris and/or soil, wash it with a 10% bleach solution, and then rinse it thoroughly. This will sanitize it, reducing the potential spread of diseases or insects.

In our next article, we'll discuss the basics of plant selection and design for container gardening. In the meantime, browse through garden books and magazines or online for ideas that you would like to incorporate into your garden and what you want to accomplish in your own container garden!

The Tulare-Kings Counties Master Gardeners will answer your questions:

Visalia Farmer's Market- 1st & 3rd Saturdays, 8-11 am, 2100 W. Caldwell Ave (behind Sears)

January 14 - Rose Pruning Workshop, Woodlake Botanical Garden - 10:00 am - 1:00 pm

Jan. 18, 8-10 am -- Public Rose Pruning -- Tulare County Courthouse, Visalia

January 21 - Rose Pruning Workshop, Ralph Moore Garden, Visalia - 10:00 am - 1:00 pm

January 21 – Composting Class, Tulare Public Library – 11 am

Questions? Call the Master Gardeners:

Tulare County: (559) 684-3325, Tues & Thurs, 9:30-11:30;

Kings County: (559) 852-2736, Thursday Only, 9:30-11:30 a.m

Visit our website for past articles, UC gardening information, or email us with your questions:

http://ucanr.edu/sites/UC_Master_Gardeners/

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/mgtularekings14/>; Instagram at: @mgtularekings

NEW! Signup for our E-Newsletter on our Home Page! https://ucanr.edu/sites/UC_Master_Gardeners/