

Cultivating Creative Containers

by Valerie Reinhardt,
HORTICULTURE EDUCATION SPECIALIST

NOT BLESSED WITH ABUNDANT GARDENING SPACE or perfect gardening conditions? Still crave the splash of color from floral gardens or the reward of a homegrown tomato? Then container gardening is for you.

Planting containers is an easy way to spruce up your outdoor space without the hassle of cultivating a garden. Planters can go on a patio, deck, balcony or any place that needs a little color. You can plant containers with perennials, annuals, vegetables and even herbs. A container of herbs outside the kitchen door makes for easy access to fresh herbs whenever you need them.

Any container that can hold soil can be used for mini gardens, but size and drainage must be addressed. Succulent plants like hens-and-chickens can grow in very small containers but drainage is necessary. Even plants that require a lot of water still need good drainage because mineral salt can build up in poorly drained soils and overly wet soil can lead to root rot.

If you plan to grow vegetables, you should consider the size and type of container. Large containers work best, as they have plenty of water holding capacity and most vegetable plants use a lot of water. Many vegetables like tomatoes and squash are large plants and need plenty of room and support. You can plant more than one vegetable plant per container, but remember that some plants will outgrow others and take over.



One of many containers at Farmpark, this pot includes a colorful array of sweet potato vine, coleus, geraniums and million bells.

Another factor to consider is the location of your container garden. If it is a hanging basket or planter that you may want to move around, good quality plastic pots are ideal because they are much lighter than clay or ceramic pots. Buy plastic that is UV resistant or the container will fade and start to crack.

Heavier clay pots are great for plants that are top heavy. They are also porous and have the benefit of breathing, but cannot be left out over winter or they will freeze and crack. Soil in clay pots dries out faster, but that may be ideal for cacti and succulents.

Strawberry jars come in both clay and plastic and are ideal for planting strawberries. They also make excellent mini herb gardens; you can plant different herbs in each of the little pockets.

Floral planters can add zing to any garden and your choice of plant material is expanding every year. One of the most popular plants used to add color and splash to a container are the wide array of ornamental sweet potato vines like the chartreuse leaf "Margret." Combine them with some of the very vibrant maroon or orange leafed coleus and you have an eye-catching and dramatic display. Cannas and feathery grasses add interest and height to your plantings. Use plants with different textures to add interest. Planters with scented geraniums, basil or other highly aromatic plants near walkways add fragrance as people walk by.

Whatever type of container garden you choose, remember that fertilization is key. Even the best potting mix has a limited amount of soil nutrients, so you will need to add slow release fertilizer when planting your mini garden. If you don't, you will need to fertilize regularly during the active growing season.

For more creative ideas or help with container gardening, visit the Plant Science Center at Lake Metroparks Farmpark and explore our green oasis this winter.