

Trumpet Vine

A Bi-monthly Publication for the Master Gardeners of Cuyahoga County



Container Gardening

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When growing trees choke out sunlight or heavy clay soil makes gardening a challenge, the creative gardener remains undaunted: she grows in containers. When the site does not comply (or even when it does), many gardeners choose to use containers for the advantages they offer in the garden. Containers are, above all, portable, offering the opportunity to quickly add a splash of color or distract from a less desirable view. They can help direct the eye through the garden by serving as focal points. They can also be a way to economize in the landscape – the gardener can choose a few choice annuals instead of spending money on flat after flat.

Containers

The most common mistake made by novice container gardeners is in choosing a container that's too small. Roots are quick to grow in the warm, porous soils of an above-ground container. As they fill their pots, plants in small containers will dry out quickly, and may need watering twice daily. This is often the case with hanging baskets purchased at this time of year. Many times, they are already full to overflowing, both above and below ground, in May. **By August, these plants seem to dry out a minute after watering, and may subsequently appear scorched and chlorotic.** Repotting into a larger container in late summer can help keep these pot-bound plants vigorous until the first frost.

A wide variety of containers is available, including every size and shape of plastic and clay pots. Because they are porous, clay pots can dry out quickly, and many gardeners choose not to use them for this reason. New composite pots are available -- which fool the eye by mimicking clay – but, unlike clay, they do not lose moisture through their sides. These composite containers are also lighter than clay pots, making them easily moved throughout the landscape at the gardener's whim.

Besides what can be purchased, the creative gardener **can find a huge assortment of containers with some hunting at garage sales or thrift stores.** An old picnic basket, weathered crate or large enamel bowl can all make handsome containers. So long as the vessel has a drain hole and can hold enough soil mix, the sky's the limit. One creative gardener I know uses just about any container – from decorative cookie tins to an old dresser with plants spilling out of the open drawers. With good plant choices, nearly any container will look great once the plants have filled out.

Growing Mix

Many plants grow better in containers than in the ground. Soil mixes in pots can be light and fluffy -- ten inches or more in depth; few of us can boast the same for our garden soils. Standard potting soil is not a good choice for containers. It tends to be heavy, with few pore spaces to hold vital oxygen and water. Potting soil can be amended by mixing in perlite, peat moss or vermiculite, or a high quality pre-mixed soil can be purchased. Ask what the growers use at your favorite garden center; you can bet it's not a bag of cheap potting soil!



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February 13, April 13,
June 13, August 13
October 13,
December 13

Submit articles electronically in Word format and photos in JPG format.

Some gardeners like to fill the bottom of containers with inert materials -- like stones, mulch or packing peanuts. These materials do not improve drainage, contrary to popular belief; they serve only to reduce the soil volume. **A few shards of a broken clay pot covering the drainage hole to prevent soil from leaking out is all that's needed in the bottom of containers.**

Most soil mixes do not contain nutrients, so **containers will need to be fertilized.** Slow-release fertilizers are easy and convenient to use, and will last as long as three months, but can be expensive. Water-soluble fertilizers can be used instead, but need to be added weekly throughout the gardening season.

Plant Selection

As far as plant choice is concerned, spending extra money on specialty annuals is worth the investment. When deciding what to plant, a talented Master Gardener friend suggests using **the three f's: focal point, foliage and flowing plants.** New Guinea impatiens or heliotrope make handsome focal points, with coleus or fiber-optic grass for foliage, and sweet potato vine or a wave petunia to flow over the container's edges. Pull colors together by echoing hues throughout the planting, such as a theme of chartreuse or silver foliage.

Using only one or two flower colors can have a dramatic effect. Combine purple heliotrope, verbena and lobelia, with complementary foliage hues, such as silver dusty miller and silver licorice plant for a striking, eye-catching mix. Gone are the days of one geranium, one marigold, a spike and some alyssum. Use the expansive annual plant choices now available at good garden centers. Shop now for the best selection.



Photo: pinterest.com

Photo chosen by Trumpet Vine