



The Rewards of Container Gardening

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What's in *YOUR* Backyard? Containers!

Spring planting leads to a lush summer display in the containers placed about our decks and patios. We as gardeners should not neglect the latter seasons of autumn and winter. Gardens are created to be enjoyed throughout the year and our container gardens should not escape this master plan. With thoughtful planning we can avoid nature's stillness of Winter and plant exuberance that will be enjoyed until the following Spring, if not later! A garden of autumn & containers needs special consideration when it comes to container choices, soil mixes, plant combinations, and site selection. The following is a list of guidelines which outlines a good plan.

WHY use containers? *"They're just so much fun!"*

- Softens hardscape
- Elevate plants for height/screens
- Ultimate in flexible gardening with minimal garden space
- Don't have to deal with poor soil
- Highlight unusual plants

CHOOSING the correct container: **B I G G E R is better!**

Terra cotta/clay—inexpensive, readily available, heavy, can't take winters outdoors

- These should generally be avoided because of the potential of cracking. There are special "frostproof" terra-cotta containers, but their ability to withstand multiple freezes and thaws is unlikely. The expense of the frostproof containers also makes them unobtainable for most gardeners. Weight is also a concern as the empty pot is likely to weigh more than 50 pounds. If terra-cotta is chosen be sure the pot is tapered with a small base and large opening. This will allow the expanding rootball to push vertically out of the container instead of pushing horizontally on the sides.

Plastics/synthetics—Lightweight, many styles available, resistant to cracking

- These are usually the best choice for most gardeners. Color choices range from terra-cotta, gray, green, and white. The fact that these containers look most like natural terra-cotta makes them most desirable. Detailing, like rolled edges and lips, add to the value. These are very lightweight when empty making it easy to reposition them in the garden.

Ceramics/glazed—attractive color choices, expensive, sometimes missing drain holes

- These are beautiful choices for the summer garden as their range of shapes and colors is outstanding. Expense is a limiting factor as some of these containers can be priced well over \$100. These containers typically do not withstand our winters and should be protected from the cold by going into a garage or basement.

Wood—the natural choice, medium weight, prone to decay.

- Be careful not to use containers that are made of pressure-treated lumber since they can leech harmful chemicals into the soil. NEVER plant vegetables in *treated* containers. Teak, cedar and redwood are the better choices for natural wood containers and they resist decay.

Cast Stone, concrete and composite materials—very heavy and durable

- The containers are generally frost proof, but care should be taken to ensure a light potting mix is used within. If the container is already cracked it should not be left outdoors during the winter.

SOIL MIXES for containers—*not all soils were created equal!*

Choose mixes formulated for *container use*. Do not use straight garden soil. Consider what plants will be displayed to determine what components. Tropical plants enjoy a peat based media whereas succulents prefer a bit more sand. Permanent shrubs need *some* garden soil to avoid long-term decomposition and sinking.

As with all container gardens a well drained mix is required. Several drainage holes should be drilled in the bottom of each container at least as big as your little finger. Some gardeners choose to fill the bottom with Styrofoam peanuts or empty plastic pots to fill space if the container is large. This can also help improve drainage. A *soil-less* mix is a good choice as drainage is easily achieved with the combinations of peat, sand, bark, and perlite. Ordinary garden soil should be used sparingly, as it typically compacts and drains poorly in a container situation. Fertilizer should be avoided during the winter months and only if the container is to be permanently planted should fertilization occur. In March I usually removed all my winter plantings and plant them in my garden to then fill the empty containers with early spring plants.

SITE SELECTION -*Oh where oh where will my little pot go?*

Just as perennial or woody plant gardening depends on proper plant selection and site placement, the container garden is dependent on the same things. Warm winter days cause leaves to transpire (lose water) and when the rootball is frozen a plant cannot replace the lost moisture. If you have a very sunny exposed area then choose very fine leafed evergreen or deciduous plants with colored twigs or berries. If your site is shady or has only partial sun then the choices expand. Consider using tall and hardy plants in the container to shade smaller more sensitive ones. A plant that stands 2' tall can cast a large shadow on a neighboring selection. The angle of the winter sun is quite low which can help cut down on leaf burn.

PLANT SELECTION

<i>Perennials</i>	Anemone japonica 'Bressingham 'Double Pink'
	Anemone tomentosa 'Robustissima'
	Aster cordifolia
	Aster oblongifolius 'October Skies'
	Carex morrowii 'Variegata'
	Chrysanthemum 'Bright Cheryl'
	Dryopteris erythrosa 'Brilliance'
	Echinacea 'Ruby Star'
	Eupatorium hyssopifolium
	Heuchera 'Caramel', 'Berry Smoothie', 'Montrose Ruby'
	Iris ensata 'Variegata'
	Leucanthemum 'Daisy May'
	Miscanthus 'Little Zebra'
	Miscanthus 'Cosmopolitan'
	Miscanthus 'Little Kitten'
	Sedum 'Autumn Joy'
	<u>Schizachyrium scoparium</u> 'Prairie Blues'
	Solidago 'Golden Fleece'
	Solidago 'Fireworks'
<i>Annuals</i>	Beta vulgaris 'Bright Lights'
	Brassica oleracea 'Peacock Red'
	Carex 'Cappucino'
	Carex 'Frosty Curls'
	Carex 'Toffee Twist'
	Diascia 'Flying Colors Trailing Antique Rose'
	Heliotropium 'Fragrant Cloud'
	Lobelia erinus 'Lucia Dark Blue'
	Nemesia fruticans 'Blue Bird'
	Phormium 'Maori Sunrise'
	Phormium 'Carousel'
	Rosmarinus officinalis
	Salvia leucantha 'All Purple'
	Salvia officinalis 'Tricolor'
	Salvia officinalis 'Argenteovariegata'
	Viola 'Crystal Bowl Blue & Orange'
<i>Shrubs</i>	Cornus sanguinea 'Midwinter Fire'
	Cornus sericea 'Silver & Gold'
	Euonymus fortuneii 'Radicans'
	Ilex verticillata 'Maryland beauty'
	Ilex verticillata 'Winter Gold'
	Osmanthus heterophyllus 'Variegata'
<i>Accents</i>	Salix tortulosa
	Pine cones (Pinus strobus)
	Osage Oranges (Maclura pomifera)
	Green Walnuts (Juglans nigra)
	Crabapple (Malus)
	Gourds (Cucurbita)
	Bird's Nests

PLANT CARE

WATERING your container garden—*“So when exactly do I have to water this pot?”*

Water “As needed” depending on amount of sun, reflected heat, air circulation. During the winter, always water your containers with cold water on warm sunny days about once per week. Forgetful waterers can spare plant misery by using hydro gel water crystals. Avoid wetting the foliage in densely planted displays as disease is likely to occur.

FERTILIZING your potted treasures—*“Don’t kill me with love!”*

Apply a liquid feed **weekly weekly**, during the growing season only. Plants enjoy a little food on a regular basis. Use a well balanced formulation like (N)20-(P)20-(K)20. Peter’s Professional Plant Food and well as Miracle-Gro are trusted names and readily available. The nitrogen makes plants grow and remain green while phosphorus encourages flowering.

GROOMING your garden—*“He loves me, he loves me not, he loves me, he loves me not.....”*

Even a potted garden needs clean-up and removal of yellow leaves. Keep the plants free of dead branches and this will decrease insect and disease occurrence. Use sharp pruners like Felco brand bypass shears. Avoid “anvil” type pruners since they crush stems and generally don’t make a clean cut. For smaller gardens, bonsai-type scissors are good choices to get into tight spaces. Your local reputable garden center will be able to assist you in making good choices!

Check out what Karl has been up to at
www.KarlGercens.com

