

ORNAMENTAL CONTAINERS



Pots full of flowers and attractive foliage plants can turn any patio, deck, or balcony into a beautiful ornamental garden. Even if you have plenty of space for a garden, containers with pretty plants let you decorate many spaces around the outside of your home with nature's brilliant colors. Nurseries, home stores, and other retailers now sell ready-to-go pots and hanging baskets with plant combinations for different styles and needs, but it can be fun to **create your own**.

Container Choices

Visit any well-stocked garden center and you'll see dozens of types of pots to pick from. Terra cotta has a timeless appeal while ceramic containers come in a wide variety of colors and shapes to match any décor. You'll find plastic pots in lots of styles, including those that look almost indistinguishable from terra cotta or ceramic. Plastic containers have the benefit of being lighter, so you can move them around more easily, and they're more durable than breakable clay pots. Hanging baskets—typically made of plastic—let you use more space and add another dimension to your container garden. **Window boxes are an appealing option**, especially for homes where there is no deck or balcony. They come in a variety of styles and materials, too.

You aren't limited to containers specifically designed for plants. Imaginative gardeners repurpose watering cans, teapots, wagons and wheelbarrows, sinks and bathtubs, wooden barrels, and much more for planting flowers. The only real requirement for a flowerpot is drainage holes so excess water can flow out.

Picking Plants

Most annual plants and many perennials grow well in containers, so your choices are (nearly) unlimited. You can fill a pot with a single variety of big, bold flowers such as gerbera daisies or lush New Guinea impatiens. Your containers become compact gardens when you mix together different varieties in the same pot. For a pleasing design, include three different types of plants known to pros as **thrillers** (*tall and striking*), **fillers** (*colorful and mounding*), and **spillers** (*vining or trailing*). Consider varieties with distinctive foliage, such as coleus and begonias, as well as those that bloom.

Many edible plants are attractive in container gardens.

Strawberries, sweet potato vines, leaf lettuces, small hot peppers, and herbs such as dill and basil all blend well with ornamental plants. **Another option:** grow native plants such as purple coneflowers and asters, and your container garden becomes a valuable link in a network of plants that provide food and shelter to pollinators.

Soil Mix

Potting soil blends for healthy container gardens need to drain well yet absorb and disperse enough moisture to keep plants hydrated. Look for products that include sphagnum moss, coir (*a by-product of coconut processing*) or pine bark, vermiculite or perlite (*little white mineral pellets*), and compost or worm castings. Pass on bags of potting soil with blue or green crystals of synthetic fertilizer—those plant foods stimulate unhealthy growth and may be harmful to the environment. Flowering plants thrive on a healthy organic diet.

You may have heard or read that you should put large stones or other space-filling items in the bottom of your pots to reduce the volume of soil and make them lighter. **Don't do it:** Roots need soil to continue to expand, which makes the whole plant healthier and more vigorous. When you fill your pots with soil, leave at least 2 to 3 inches below the rim so that you can water the plants without overflowing the container. **Moisten the soil mix thoroughly before you plant.**

Planting Time

Set the tallest (*thriller*) plant in the center of the pot and then work outward from there with the fillers and spillers. As you decide how many plants to include, bear in mind that while containers look best when they are full, all the plants' roots will need room to spread out as they grow.

Before planting, **remove dead or broken leaves** on plants and the soil surface. **They can harbor diseases or pests.** After gently sliding the plant out of its container, inspect its roots. Healthy roots are white, while diseased or rotting roots look brown or black and should be clipped off. Gently push your finger into the root ball to loosen any that are wrapped around the ball.



ORNAMENTAL CONTAINERS *continued*

Design Style

Your individual containers become more of a garden when you group them together. Organize them in odd-numbered clusters of three or five to create an eye-catching display. Vary the heights, colors, and textures of the pots and plants for best effect.

Set larger planters on top of “pot feet” such as small wooden blocks or bricks. This allows air to flow beneath the pot and ensures excess moisture dries up, which protects your plants from fungal diseases and your patio or deck from damage.

Care and Maintenance

Watering

The soil mix in containers needs to be well-drained to prevent root rot, but plants need a steady supply of moisture. **Check on your containers each day by pushing your finger into the soil up to the second knuckle.** If the soil feels completely dry, soak the soil around the plants (*rather than the leaves*) until water runs out the bottom hole. Containers in full sun may need to be watered every day but be sure to check first—potted plants with soggy roots are prone to many problems. Morning is the best time to water, so the plants can draw up the moisture as the soak up sunlight.

Feeding

Liquid fish and seaweed fertilizer (*Neptune’s Harvest and Alaska are widely available brands*) is a balanced plant food that’s natural and safe for plants and other living things. Be sure to follow the recommendations for amounts on the label—**overfertilizing is harmful for plants and the environment.** Give your ornamental containers a dose of this fertilizer about every other week.

Deadhead and Groom

Keep your container garden looking its best by regularly removing dead or dying leaves and spent flowers. “Deadheading,” or clipping off finished blooms, also stimulates annuals to continue producing new flowers rather than making seeds, which ends their life cycle.

LEARN MORE

[PHS McLean Library Container Gardens Subject Guide](#)

[Penn State Extension: The Art of Container Gardening](#)

[Rutgers University Extension: Outdoor Container Gardening with Flowering and Foliage Plants](#)

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