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## Gardening in Containers

If you have been asked to test-drive your concept, space isn't available, the site can't be prepared in time to plant this year or you would rather start with only a few favorite plants, then container gardening is for you. It's fun and easy if you are aware of a few tricks.

Virtually any container can be used as long as drainage holes are punched in the bottom, it meets the size requirements of the plant and it is free of toxic contaminants. Larger containers will maintain moisture longer in the outside heat. Smaller containers perform better in a limited indoor space if lots of bright light is available. Make sure the container will handle the mature plant, or you'll have to do some repotting. A five-gallon container is the minimum size; a 15-gallon container is excellent. A nylon mesh screen (used for window screens) placed over the drainage holes will prevent pests from entering and soil from washing away.

All sorts of vegetables and flowers can be mixed together. If you choose fruiting plants (peppers, tomatoes), flowering vegetables (broccoli) or leaf plants (lettuce, chard), you can eat your harvest over time while the plants continue to grow.

### Sun Exposure

Indoors or outdoors? There are pros and cons to each method. You'll get six to eight hours of sunlight outside but risk cooking tender roots in the summer's heat. The trick is to expose the plants to sunlight but shade the container. If possible, place your containers where they receive morning sun and afternoon shade. The same ideas for shade and insect protection discussed for your outdoor garden (taller plants as a source of shade, floating row cover) ap-



ply to container gardening as well. Wind and heat increase water evaporation, but mulch and larger containers can help offset the loss.

When indoors, adequate light will be a challenge, as many buildings in the Southwest are designed to prevent sun from entering. Window ledges can sometimes work, but leggy, pale, reaching plants are a sign that lighting conditions need improvement. Six hours of direct sunlight is still the minimum, even if you are gardening indoors.

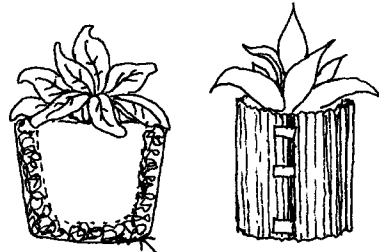
Full spectrum grow lights are expensive. Two “cool” lights can work, but a recent National Gardening Association study suggests one “cool” and one “warm” incandescent light, kept four to six inches over the plants, on a timer for 16 hours each day will generate the appropriate intensity. (The terms “cool” and “warm” refer to the color spectrum, not temperature of the lights.) Ask your middle or high school vocational center for help in building the light fixture.



### Tricks to Keep Pots Cool

☞ **Double Pot.** Place your potted plant inside another, larger pot and fill the space in between with sphagnum peat moss or shredded newspaper. Keep the filler moist to provide a cool insulator around the potted plant.

☞ **Dress Your Pot.** Make “collars” from thin cardboard placed around pots. Sun hits the plants, but not the pots.



DOUBLE POT/MOSS    CARDBOARD COLLAR



## Soil

Prepared potting soils are the best. However, realize that they are not all created equal. Cheaper mixes may not have the blend of ingredients that ensures good drainage. Master Gardeners have used the potting mixes described here with great success.

### Potting Mixes



#### Potting mix for small to medium containers

- 1/3 potting soil (good quality)
- 1/3 shredded peat moss
- 1/3 perlite or pumice\*

\*Perlite is extremely lightweight, does not absorb water and tends to wash away with repeated waterings. Pumice absorbs water and releases it slowly. Thus, it has the advantage of weight and won't wash away with the frequent waterings required for containers. Pumice, a volcanic material, is becoming more readily available at nurseries and garden supply stores.



#### Soiless mix for 15-gallon or larger containers

- 1/3 shredded peat moss
- 1/3 perlite or pumice
- 1/3 vermiculite

This mix is very lightweight, an advantage with large container gardens. It's an excellent mix because it maintains air space between the particles and allows for good drainage.

## Water and Fertilizer

Moist—not soggy—soil is again the goal. A dry soil crust doesn't always mean a dry root zone. Use a popsicle stick, ruler or your finger as a dip stick. For vacations or long weekends, a woven cotton wick (try strands from a mop head) from a water-filled

holding tray into the pots works well. If drainage is poor, check for blockage in the holes and consider adding a few more holes on the lower sides of the container.

Container gardens require very regular applications of fertilizer or a timed-release fertilizer mixed in at planting time. Follow fertilizer label instructions. As with your outdoor gardens, there's no easy rule for how often to water. In cooler weather, containers won't need as much water and some Master Gardeners recommend applying a diluted fertilizer with each watering. In hot weather, you may need to water daily, so cut back on fertilizer to once a week. This is a guide only. Your containers, wind and sun exposure and the size of your plants will determine specific watering and fertilizing needs. (See Chapter 6 for more information on fertilizers.)

Always empty saucers or basins after watering plants. The accumulated salts in the water may burn plant roots as they draw water back up into the pot.



## Pollination

Some fruiting plants, such as tomatoes, zucchini, squash and pumpkins, need insects, birds or wind for pollination. If your containers have limited or no time outdoors, you will need to pollinate by hand, shaking the flowers or using a fine brush.

