

## Chapter 1

# Why Grow Plants in Containers?

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Making the case for container plants
  - ▶ Designing a good look
  - ▶ Putting it all together
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**E**veryone has the time and the space to have a garden. No matter how busy you are or how small your yard — or even if you don't have a yard at all — you surely have room for a plant-filled container or two.

Container gardening is quickly becoming one of the most popular growing techniques. And it's not just for apartment dwellers with limited space. Even gardeners with room for an in-ground garden opt to grow some or all of their plants in pots.

If you're new to gardening, growing plants in containers is one of the easiest ways to get started. Place a potted geranium or two on the front stoop, grow some herbs in a pot by the kitchen door, or sow a few salad greens in a barrel planter — before you know it you'll be bitten by the container gardening bug.

Are you an experienced gardener? Growing plants in containers allows you to cultivate a larger selection of plants than you could in your garden. You can push hardiness limits, build a water garden in a pot, or, if you're ready for a real challenge, try your hand at bonsai.

Whatever your skill level and garden situation, we're here to help you grow terrific plants in containers. We show you how to match the right plants with the right pots and give them the kind of care that produces beautiful results. It's time to get growing!

## *Getting a Closer Look at Container Gardening*

Containers bring plants up close and personal. You can choose the plant, the container, and the location. And when you put them all together, you can stand back and marvel at what you've created. But container gardening is more than just a pretty planter. Here are some of our favorite reasons to surround yourself with container gardens.

### *Expressing your creative side*

Combining plants and pots brings the art of gardening to a whole new level. Need convincing? Check out the color photos in the center of this book and observe how the size, shape, color, and material of the containers complement the artful arrangements of plants within them. Containers can enhance plants by echoing colors, providing contrast, and drawing the eye to a focal point. Now, multiply that effect by combining several containers, and you have the makings of true horticultural art.



Containers are an easy and inexpensive way to dress up a drab house exterior — think window boxes, hanging baskets, and stately urns flanking the front door (see the color photos in the center of the book for an example of this). They can make your outdoor living spaces more inviting, decorate your deck for a party, and provide privacy.

### *Getting the ultimate in gardening convenience*

More and more people are growing edibles (vegetables and herbs; see Chapter 8) in addition to flowers, and containers make it easy and convenient. Step over to your windowsill to snip a sprig or two of rosemary, basil, sage, or any other herb to liven up meals. Hang a basket filled with cherry tomatoes on the back porch for a quick, nutritious snack. Even if you have a full garden out back, consider adding planters filled with your favorite edibles or mixing in veggies and herbs with your ornamentals. Find out more about mixing plants in containers in Part V.

## *Extending the vegetable gardening season*

Because containers sit above ground level and are exposed to the spring sunshine, the soil mix in them warms up faster than garden soil, letting you start planting earlier. There's no need to wait until garden soil dries out enough to rototill — you can sow cool-season crops like spinach and lettuce in containers weeks before you could plant them in the ground.

Containers also let you grow crops later into autumn. If an early light frost threatens, you can easily cover containers with old sheets or blankets. If a hard freeze or prolonged cold spell is predicted, you simply move containers to a protected location. When it warms up again, move the containers back into the sunshine. Early cold snaps are often followed by weeks of mild weather, so you can continue harvesting even after in-ground plants have succumbed to the cold. Chapter 2 has more details on climate considerations.

## *Taking your garden with you*

If you've ever planted gardens at a rental property and then had to move away, you know how disappointing it can be to leave your favorite plants behind. In this era of high mobility and frequent moves, container gardening lets you bring your plants with you wherever you go. New, lightweight containers and wheeled dollies make moving plants easy. (In Chapter 17 you find techniques for moving large planters.)

## *Making gardening more accessible*

Does the mere thought of spending an hour on your knees weeding make your back ache? Well, put those aches and pains behind you. Plants in containers are easier to reach and need little weeding and no tilling, raking, or hoeing.

Containers allow people with physical challenges to continue (or start) to enjoy all the benefits of gardening, including fresh air, exercise, healthy food, and beautiful flowers, plus the intangibles, like connecting with nature and nurturing the soul. Growing plants in containers is a great idea for all gardeners, but it's a must for gardeners with limited mobility. You can locate containers in convenient places, such as near doorways and water spigots or on porches and decks. Turn to Chapter 21 for more ways to use containers to make gardening more accessible.

## *So Many Choices! Knowing What to Grow*

If you look around your neighborhood, you may think that you're limited to planting the same things your neighbors are growing in their gardens. But when you plant in containers, your plant options expand so much that you may be overwhelmed by the available choices.

Fortunately, there's an easy way to begin narrowing down your choices. Your first step is to consider what kind of commitment you want to make. Is a short-term relationship more your style, or do you want to devote your attention to a plant for several years?

### *Testing the waters with annual flowers and vegetables*

Most people fill their containers with plants that grow for a single season; at the end of the season they toss the plants and start with fresh plants for the next round of growing. This is the easiest way to grow plants in containers because you don't have to worry about the temperature extremes that challenge many plants, especially in regions with cold winters. Fear not: Choosing this option doesn't mean you sacrifice anything. Some of the biggest, brightest, and longest-blooming flowers are ideal for single-season containers, as are most vegetables. For example, petunias, impatiens, beans, and tomatoes are grown as *annuals* and enjoyed for a single growing season. They require just a few months of commitment from you.

### *Promising to nurture and protect in summer and in winter*

Permanent container plantings — those that last for a few years or longer — require more commitment from you, but they also reward you in ways single-season plants can't. If you want to pick peonies for bouquets or harvest peaches for pie, you need to think long-term. Plants for permanent plantings include perennials, trees, shrubs, fruits, and berries. Most plants in these categories adapt readily to growing in containers; the biggest challenge lies in helping them survive cold winter weather. Container-grown plants are more vulnerable to temperature extremes than plants growing in the ground, so you need to take steps to protect them. However, with some careful planning and diligence on your part, you can have that vase filled with peonies and plenty of peaches for pie.

## *Helping Your Container Plants Thrive*

Caring for plants in containers has its ups and downs. On one hand, container gardening is easier than traditional gardening — you don't have to do any weeding; you can leave the heavy tools in the garage; you can pluck the plant out of the container and toss it in the compost pile at the end of its growing season.

But the catch is that plants in containers need a little more ongoing attention than plants in the ground. Container plants depend on you for their water and nutrients. They can't send their roots out beyond the container to find what they need to survive. The following sections take a closer look at some of the pros and cons of caring for plants in containers.

### *Meeting a plant's exacting requirements*

Containers let you grow plants with very different requirements side by side because you can give individual plants the exact conditions that they need — conditions that may be impossible to achieve in your garden.

Consider azaleas and cactuses, for example. With containers, you can plant azaleas in acid soil and cactuses in sandy soil (see Chapter 4 for the dirt on soil). You can water azaleas abundantly and cactuses sparingly (see Chapter 15 when you're ready to wet your plant's whistle). You can relocate plants as necessary to provide optimum sunlight levels — part shade for azaleas, full sun for cactuses.

Container growing also improves the productivity of some vegetable crops. For example, northern gardeners often get a larger, earlier harvest of eggplants and peppers when they grow them in containers because the sun warms the soil, speeding the growth of these heat-loving plants.

### *Minimizing pesky pest problems*

Garden soil often harbors microbes that cause plant diseases. For example, fusarium wilt and early blight are two soil-borne diseases that can infect tomato plants when raindrops splash soil onto plant foliage. By growing plants in sterile potting mix, you eliminate the source of these diseases (Chapter 4 talks about soil mixes).

Insects that pass from plant to plant in the garden are less likely to find potted plants up on a deck or porch. And when you discover a pest problem, you can isolate affected plants by moving their pots away from those of other

plants until the problem is under control. Chapter 18 covers prevention and treatment of pests and diseases.

## *Facing the challenges of growing in containers*

Something that we can't stress enough is that a container is not a natural place for a plant to grow. Because of this, container plants usually involve more of a time commitment than the same plants in the ground.

A plant growing in the ground develops an extensive network of roots to take in water and nutrients, and the ground insulates the roots from wide temperature swings. In a container, on the other hand, roots are confined, so the plants need a constant supply of water and nutrients. Plus, the soil mass in a container is small, so it heats up faster in the sun, chills down more quickly during cold spells, and dries out much sooner on a sunny day. (Flip to Chapter 2 for more insights on how climate influences container growing.)

A container garden may need daily tending, depending on the size and type of container, what's growing in it, and the weather. Plus, you may need to tackle a few chores that don't apply to in-ground plants — repotting plants and cleaning and preserving containers, for example. (Part IV is all about how to care for container plants.)

But overall, we think the extra effort is worth it, or we wouldn't be writing this book!

## *Matching Plant to Location*

Some plants need full sun to thrive, but any place that has sufficient light to read by is a suitable location for some type of potted plant. The key is choosing the right plant for the spot. An open, sunny area on your patio calls for something dramatic, such as a fruit tree or big pot of petunias; indoors, the corner of your desk may be a perfect spot for a small philodendron or spider plant. The great thing about growing plants in containers is that you're not limited by climate, how much space you have, or the plants commonly available at most garden centers. Read on for details.

## *Growing plants in impossible places*

Don't have yard space for a garden? Use containers, and you can grow plants anywhere — on a rooftop, a small condominium patio, the porch of a mobile home, or the deck of a houseboat.

Perhaps you want to grow tomatoes, but your entire yard is shaded except for one spot by the front porch. Pot up a few plants and you'll have your tomatoes and eat them, too.

Maybe you have acres of space for a garden, but the soil is rocky, or hard clay, or otherwise uninviting to plants. When you grow in containers, you choose the soil mix that best suits your plants' needs. (Find out more about soil in Chapter 4.)

## *Expanding your gardening palette with plants outside your hardiness zone*

Containers let you grow a greater variety of plants than you ever thought possible. You can push the limits dictated by your hardiness zone because you can move plants to a protected area during winter, letting you grow oranges in Minneapolis and avocados in Vermont.

Fabulous figs, beautiful bougainvillea, luscious lemons and limes — the possibilities are endless, even in frosty climates, once you know how to protect plants from the cold. (In Chapter 2 you can read more about the challenges of climate and techniques to overwinter plants.)

## *Inviting nature into your indoor and outdoor living spaces*

Shopping malls, office buildings, and urban parks are filled with plants for a reason: Plants make people happy! They're beautiful, they're fragrant, and they provide a subliminal connection with nature that both inspires and calms. (The color green is considered soothing — one explanation for the term *green room*, where actors wait before going on stage.)

Indoors, not only are houseplants decorative, but many also cleanse the air of toxins. Be bold! In addition to a few window plants, use a line of tall plants, such as bamboo or palms, as living screens between rooms. Use containers to reinforce your decorating style — minimalist, baroque, or country-casual. (Explore more possibilities in Chapter 14.)

Use container plants in the landscape to define outdoor “rooms” by creating a visual separation between areas with different uses (the grilling and eating areas, for example). Use containers to control traffic flow, to temporarily block unsightly views, or to define a private reading nook.

## *Designing with Container Plants*

To whet your appetite for what’s to come in this book, imagine a few of the following containers in your landscape. We give you the “recipes” for these and others in Chapter 19:

- ✔ **Nature’s bounty:** Grow the tastiest and most nutritious fruits right on your deck or patio. Start by planting a dwarf peach tree in a wooden half barrel. Add three strawberry plants, and then dress it all up with a border of annual flowers. Sit back and enjoy luscious strawberries in spring, peaches in summer, and flowers all season long.
- ✔ **Shade-lover’s delight:** Forget trying to get grass to grow under that big maple tree. Instead, plant a rustic planter box with shade-loving fuchsia, ferns, and impatiens. Then sit back in a comfy chair with a glass of lemonade and watch your neighbors mow their lawns.
- ✔ **Suspended animation:** Does your porch lack pizzazz? Fill a moss-lined wire basket to overflowing with trailing ivy, bright-faced pansies, sapphire lobelias, and wine-red geraniums. In just a few weeks, the basket will be blanketed with blooms, enticing passersby to stop and admire your creativity.

When you’re ready for something different or more challenging, we offer ideas for specialty plants, like cactuses, holiday plants, water gardens, and bonsai, in Chapter 20. You can delight yourself and your friends with your newfound green thumb.



## One Last Thing: Plant Names

Every plant has a two-part botanical name, identifying its genus and species. The botanical name always appears in italics with the genus name (which appears first) capitalized. For example, *Tagetes erecta* is the botanical name for American marigold. The genus name (*Tagetes*) refers to a group of closely related plants found in nature — all the marigolds. The species name (*erecta*) refers to a specific member of the genus — such as the tall, orange-flowered American marigold. (The term *species* is shorthand for *specific epithet*, which may help you remember that it refers to a specific plant within a *genus*, or general group.)

Of course, most plants also have common names. But common names can vary from place to place and from time to time. *Nemophila menziesii* will always be the botanical name for the same plant, no matter where in the world you find it. But when it comes to this plant's common name, some people call it California bluebell, while others know it as baby blue eyes. To add to this confusion, different plants may share the same common name. For example, various kinds of butterfly flowers exist, in addition to butterfly bush and butterfly weed. Sometimes, the common name is the genus name. For example, the botanical name for the petunia is *Petunia hybrida*.

Some specialized plants have an additional name tacked on to their botanical names, which indicates that it is a variety or cultivar (cultivated variety) of that species. A variety or cultivar differs from the species in some particular way, such as flower color. For example, *Tagetes erecta* Snowbird is a white-flowered variety of the tall American marigold.

Once a genus name has been mentioned, it is sometimes abbreviated to its first letter. For example, if you see the names *Tagetes erecta* and *T. patula*, it's implied that the *T.* stands for *Tagetes*.

You can see why people who want to be precise stick to botanical names, but for most of us and for most of the time, common names work fine. However, there are times when it pays to double-check — such as when you're talking about salvias and sages (see the sidebar on salvia for more info).

## Salvia: One genus, many species

The genus *Salvia* includes a remarkable number of plants with very different characteristics, although all have similar flower spikes topped with asymmetrical flowers, and many have fragrant foliage.

Annual salvia (*Salvia splendens*) is widely grown in beds and containers and produces abundant spikes of large, colorful flowers in shades of red, purple, and white. Although perennial in tropical regions, it's most often sold as an annual.

Common sage, the herb essential to Thanksgiving stuffing, is *Salvia officinalis*.

Meadow sage (*Salvia nemorosa*) is a popular perennial that is hardy to zone 4.

Pineapple sage (*Salvia elegans*) is a tender perennial with fragrant foliage that really does smell like fresh pineapple when you rub it. Although it has striking, brilliant red flowers, they're not as abundant as those of *S. splendens*; instead, *S. elegans* is grown for its fragrant foliage.

Autumn sage (*Salvia greggii*), scarlet sage (*S. coccinea*), Mexican sage (*S. mexicana* and *S. leucantha*), mealycup sage (*S. farinacea*), anise-scented sage (*S. guaranitica*), and clary sage (*S. scalarea*) are other relatively common salvias with varying degrees of hardiness.