

Container Gardening made Simple

Plants in containers bring extra colour and accent to a garden. For some gardeners, pots make the difference between having a garden and not having a garden. Tubs, barrels, pots, window boxes and hanging baskets offer boundless opportunity for small or soil-less spaces.

Planting them up is easy and, although potted plants need a little more feeding and watering than those in the ground, there are ways to simplify these basic tasks.

Watering

- In very hot, dry or windy weather you may need to water twice a day. The smaller the pot, the more you will need to water. Hanging baskets are particularly vulnerable to drying out.
- Group pots together to slow down the water loss and make watering easier.
- Water crystals act as mini reservoirs - ideal for summer. Mix them with water first and add them to the potting mix in the gel state. Don't add too many.
- A wetting agent such as 'Saturaid' ensures that your potting mix absorbs the water rather than allowing it to wash right through at watering time. Many potting mixes contain it. But you can also add it yourself. There is no danger of adding too much and it works well in conjunction with water crystals.

Feeding

- Add controlled-release fertiliser at potting time.
- Fast growing plants such as veges and annuals respond well to extra feeds of fast-acting liquid fertiliser (once a week in the growing season)
- Make sure your potting mix is moist before feeding with liquid fertiliser.
- Feed trees and shrubs in pots with controlled-release fertiliser in spring and autumn. An effective way to do this is to gently remove the top few centimetres of old potting mix and replace it with fresh potting mix containing the fertiliser.

Repotting

- If your container plants are taking a lot of watering and feeding but still fail to thrive, it could be time to repot.
- Repot the plant into the next-sized pot (not too big) if you want it to keep growing.
- To return a plant to the same pot, remove up to a quarter of the old potting mix from around the roots (if roots are tightly matted, use a knife to shave off about 5 cm from the sides and 10 cm from the bottom). Return to the pot with new potting mix containing slow-release fertiliser.



Potting up

1. Move large pots into position before planting. Sit large pots on blocks or pot feet to ensure perfect drainage.
2. Make sure your container has adequate drainage. A mesh (e.g. a piece of shade cloth) prevents soil escaping through large holes.
3. Use the best potting mix you can find. Ask which brand best suits your chosen plants. Half fill the pot with potting mix. Add slow release fertiliser if needed. For plants that hate to dry out, add water storage granules and a wetting agent.
4. Remove the plant from its nursery pot and gently tease to loosen outer roots if pot bound (roots are growing in circles).
5. Position plant, adjusting soil level so that the top of the root ball is just covered, and allowing a 1 to 2cm space between the top of the potting mix and the rim of the pot for watering.
6. Backfill with potting mix, firming as you go by pushing down the sides with your fingers.
7. Water thoroughly. This helps settle the potting mix snugly around the roots.
8. Finish with a layer of mulch to keep moisture in and weeds out. Shells, pebbles or coloured glass make an attractive finishing touch.

