

Container Gardening in the Lewis-Clark Valley

By Gayla Thayer Filler



Out of space in your flowerbeds? Want color and texture on a patio or deck? Container gardening is for you! But how do you get started? Here are some helpful hints.

Location, location, location. It's true in real estate and also in container gardening. Is the location in full sun, in shade or a combination? The amount of sun will determine what plants will thrive in your chosen spot.

Because of our extreme summer heat in the Lewis-Clark Valley, it's a good idea to provide shade for at least part of the day, even for plants that would normally endure full sun in garden soil. Soil in a container heats up and dries out faster than typical garden soil, causing container plants to suffer from heat stress. An exception? Some forms of cacti and succulents can take full sun here.

When it comes to containers, size is important. Consider large containers, 18" or more in diameter. Smaller containers are hard to maintain here in the valley because the root ball overheats and it's difficult to keep the soil properly watered. And forget "less is more" when it comes to spacing your plants. Place plants close together to achieve a full, exuberant look. An 18-inch container will easily hold twelve to sixteen four-inch bedding plants.

Ready for the fun part? Decide what plants you'd like to grow. Visit your favorite nursery for ideas. Do you want mostly flowers or mostly texture? Or do you want a combination? Would you like a limited color range, such as various shades of pink, or do you enjoy high contrast, such as pairing plants with burgundy or chartreuse leaves. Let your imagination run wild. Consider growing all annual or all perennials or mixing the two types.

Good design, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Many attractive containers have three types of plants: tall ones for overall height, full ones in the middle for a lush look, and trailing ones to draw the eye. But some containers have one dramatic plant, such as a purple fountain grass, that make a strong statement by itself. Decide what you like and go with it. Also keep in mind the color and texture of your container when choosing plants. If you include a vine, place a trellis before planting.

Potting soil, rather than garden soil, should be used in containers. It's a blend of various components designed to stay light and retain moisture. In most cases potting soil can be reused from year to year if you remove the prior year's plants, roots and all, stir up the soil and add fertilizer. The only exception to reusing potting soil is if you have previous problems with diseased plants being grown in the potting mixture. If your container had problems with diseases the previous year, it is safest to use new, pathogen free potting soil and to disinfect the growing container before replanting.

Fertilizer is essential to most containers. Choose either an organic or chemical fertilizer and apply according to the manufacturer's direction. If your plants are mostly flowers, choose a fertilizer with a high middle number to encourage blooms. If you plants are mostly non-flowering textural selection, choose a balanced fertilizer with all three numbers the same, such as 10-10-10.

Water when the top inch or so of soil feels dry. This usually means daily in the heat of summer, even twice a day if your plants get droopy. Try to water in the morning and consider installing a simple drip system if you have lots of containers. Deadhead as needed by removing spent flowers. If you let annual plants go to seed, they'll quit producing flowers. If your plants get leggy by the end of summer, cut them back by half or more to encourage new growth and flowers.

All good things must come to an end and containers are no exception. Even with our mild winters, containers can crack if left unprotected in the cold weather. This is due to moist soil expanding when it freezes. Either move them under cover where the soil will dry out or cover them with a heavy garbage bag.

Last but not least, spend some time in the winter dreaming about next year's containers.