

Maybe you'd like to try a new flower combination but starting up a "full-sized specialty garden" sounds too expensive and then, ugh, what if you don't like it?

For something more manageable, consider a few containers to add new definition to your sidewalk, deck or patio. Anything that holds soil and drains can be a container--let your imagination go! You can do a series where each pot has plants of similar colors but different shapes, all the same arrangement or unique specimens to balance each unique pot. Sun-loving plants need a minimum of 6 hours of sun but for shade lovers that can be too much (3 to 5 hours direct sun is better). So choose your plant combinations wisely. Beyond that here are some basic guidelines for success:



1. **Choose a container that can hold the plant.** Annuals can handle crowding as long as you water and fertilize regularly. Large annuals, like cannas, elephant's ears, or dahlias need a pot that is 20 inches high and from 18 to 24 inches in diameter, but there will still be room for a few small flowers to trail out around the edges. For a smaller centerpiece (say tuberous begonia, coleus or small trio of impatiens, begonias or marigolds) with trailing ivy or sweet potato vine, you can use a container 10 to 12 inches deep and across.
2. **Plant in lightweight potting soil.** Your container plants will need to stay moist but not waterlogged. Potting soil mixes are formulated to retain moisture while still draining well. Garden soil is usually too high in clay content and will hold too much water. Remember that your container needs to drain. You can put screening material over the hole in the bottom so that soil does not run out with the water.

3. **Establish a watering and fertilizing routine.** The real trick to beautiful healthy containers is monitoring their moisture. A daily dose of water will be required in hot sunny weather and maybe even two doses—one in the morning and again at midday—during extreme heat. The kind of container you choose will make a difference. Small terra cotta pots holding a quart of soil will dry out quicker than a large plastic pot with 2 gallons of soil.

Water slowly and gently allowing the water to reach all the soil in the pot and to begin draining out the bottom. Be sure to empty the saucer if you have one. Roots left in a puddle of water will rot. To manage the fertilizing, mix a slow-release fertilizer into the surface of the soil at planting time. This fertilizes your plants every time you water for over 3 months. With the slow-release system, you'll know your soil has the nutrients to keep your plants healthy. For fuller blooms, add a blossom-booster fertilizer (10-50-10 ratio) in your watering can every 2 weeks. When watering, nip off the spent flowers to prevent them from going to seed. This will encourage new growth and flowers.

**So, try something a little different this season without spending a fortune!**

Jenna O'Brien of Viridissima Horticulture & Design puts an edible container together in a video on our website, [WardsNursery.com](http://WardsNursery.com). Here are some of her additional tips and tricks for this edible container:

- No matter what you choose, be sure the container has drainage so water doesn't sit in the bottom rotting roots. The drainage hole can be covered with a rock or piece of broken pottery to prevent soil from washing out.
- For edible plants, an organic mix is preferred. Always use a lightweight soil mix for good drainage in containers. Coast of Maine Raised Bed mix or COM Container Mix has added nutrients.
- Pine bark mulch will lighten the soil even more and is perfectly suitable as a soil amendment.
- Use mulch  $\frac{1}{4}$  the way up in large pots to reduce how much soil is used and still provide drainage.
- Use your fist to push mulch down and settle it.



- Depending on the soil mix you use, you may want to mix in slow-release fertilizer directly into the mix before adding it to the pot. This will locate the fertilizer near the root zones of your plants.
- Break up any chunks of soil as you fill the container.
- Fill the pot half way.
- Adding pine bark mulch to your mix in the pot breaks up the soil even more, improves drainage and encourages root growth.
- Large potted herbs often have multiple plants.
- Break up multiple plants by cutting through the root ball.
- A little root disturbance is good to promote root development.
- Start with your center plant, packing in the soil around it. If you add more soil, mix in more pine bark mulch to keep the soil light.
- To get plants out of nursery containers, give the pot a squeeze, gently invert the pot and pull out the plant.
- Set your first plant in and pack soil around the root ball, assuming a finished soil level about 1 inch down from the pot rim. Wait to set the other plants firmly until you are happy with your arrangement.
- Scoop holes the size of the root balls, set plants in and press firmly to make contact between root ball and container soil and eliminate air pockets.
- Plants from packs often stretch out of the nursery container. Plant them a little deeper to support the weak stem.
- Determine where the buds and growth will emerge in your plants and turn the growth side to the outside of the pot.
- Snip off older blooms of annuals to encourage new buds to open.
- The spring planter was planted in late April, and could be refreshed in June by replacing leggy pansies and refilling where the pac choi had been.
- Water your container with low pressure until the water comes up to the rim. Allow to soak in. Water again to the rim. Repeat until water drains out the bottom. Rinse soil off the foliage and pot sides to give a pretty presentation.
- Keep soil evenly moist by checking moisture every few days until you become familiar with how quickly the container dries out in your location.