



Growing Pretty and Delicious Containers

Overview

Ceramic pots, window boxes and other vessels brimming with leafy greens, edible flowers, herbs or vegetables are ideal for homes big and small. Containers with beautiful edible plants offer an alternative to conventional residential landscapes and space limitations.

Edible landscaping is the use of food-producing plants in the residential landscape; in this case, plants grown in containers. A variety of containers can lift plants to heights where they can be appreciated both to the eye and the palate. Enjoy the freshness and flavor of home-grown fully ripened fruits, salads, herbs and vegetables.

Location

Most fruits and vegetables require 6-8 hours of sun to produce well. Some native plants and edible leaves, like lettuce and kale, can tolerate some shade. Where you place your containers is important. Make some observations in your yard to better understand the best sun exposure morning, noon and afternoon. If the container lands in a handy place, those fresh herbs will more likely make their way into your diet.

Containers

When selecting containers, think about how and where you will group them. What will be the common element of design that marries the aesthetics you are seeking? Factors such as container color, texture, material, shape and practicality need careful consideration. Don't be afraid to repurpose objects such as an old wheelbarrow, watering can or even those leaky boots. No matter what container you choose, it must have good drainage holes! NEVER use wood containers treated with toxic preservatives such as creosote.

Space

As a guideline, a pot 12 inches across would be the minimum size for small flowering plants and leafy greens. Always consider the mature size of the

plant. Plant spacing information on the plant labels or in seed catalogs are valuable resources.

Growing Media

Containers should be filled with potting mix or planter mix and not garden soil. Due to the intensive gardening practice, it is recommended you add a 3 to 4 month slow-release fertilizer into the potting mix.

Time and Care

Vegetable gardens, even in containers, require love and attention. That translates into pest control, weeding and watering. Apply Integrated Pest Management and use pesticides only as a last resort. The benefit of the container is easier weeding and access. Plants require careful watering. Poke your finger up to your second knuckle into the soil (2-3 inches). If it feels damp and cool, don't water. Daily watering might be warranted in the heat of the summer. Be consistent. Weekly trimming, dead-heading and thinning out plants will contribute to productive harvests. As plants in the container grow, be willing to remove those that don't work, and then add replacements to keep the container looking good. Succession planting of greens can be done by adding 3-5 seeds weekly. Finally, the application of a water-soluble fertilizer every 2-3 weeks will feed the plants. All this effort is why they taste so good!

Beauty

When planting a pot of deliciousness, consider what you like to eat first! The design will come from plant size, flower color, foliage shape, leaf patterns and a variation of textures. Consider plants with varying heights and vibrant vegetable color. It's important to mass flowers for impact. Give vegetables room and offer vertical support for plants that climb or spread as they grow. Do a little bit of research to discover plants with the characteristics you value.

Design

Thriller, Filler and Spiller Design Framework:

Thriller: the largest and most striking plant in the container, usually placed in the middle (if the pot will be viewed from all sides) or in the back of a pot (if viewed from just one side). The Thriller lends a strong vertical element to the container. This could be a pepper plant, teepee of climbing beans, blueberry bush or tomato plant. For smaller containers a tall growing Russian Kale works.

Filler : a shorter plant with a different texture and/or pattern. This will disguise a woody stem and bulk up the container with exquisiteness. Plant them all around the center thriller or in a semi-circle for the back thriller. Bright Swiss Chards, Oak Leaf Lettuce or bushy herbs like parsley, sage or cilantro can be picked as needed by the stem for fresh produce.

Spiller: a plant that trails or will overflow in a downward motion on the outside of the container. Having a contrasting texture, color of foliage/flower or developing vegetable will increase interest in the container. They are planted at the edge of the pot and adjacent to the fillers. Lemon Cucumbers or summer squash will wander and offer attractive sunny globes. A combination of trailing herbs such as rosemary and thyme will cascade to draw the eye downward in the design and offer plenty of flavors, fresh or dried.

Safety

Growing your own plants from seed gives you quality seedlings and greater choices. Not all flowers are edible. In fact, some plants create toxins to discourage animal or insect damage. Those same toxins are harmful to humans. When eating “new” plants, start with small amounts to determine if you have any food sensitivities. In most cases, the petals are the tastiest part of the flower.

Plant Selection

Check the plant label for water, sun and spacing requirements. In a “combination container” those requirements should be similar for best success and ease of care. Adding flowers to the container will attract and feed pollinators.

Most of the plants listed here will progress in their life cycle; producing leaves, flowers and then

seeds. These have been sorted by their most popular edible state.

Greens: Arugula, Beebalm, Kale, Leafy Lettuces, Mustard Greens, Swiss Chard

Vegetables: Cucumbers, Egg Plant, Peppers, Pole Beans, Scarlet Runner Beans, Spinach, Squash, Patio Tomatoes

Flower Petals: Bachelor Buttons, Borage, Calendula, Daylily, Chamomile, Elderberry, Fennel, Lilac, Hibiscus, Hops, Hyssop, Lavender, Linden, Nasturtium, Pansy, Pea, Pinks, Rose, Scented Geraniums, Signet Marigold, Tuberous Begonia, Tulip, Yucca

Herbs: Basil, Chives, Coriander, Oregano, Dill, Lemon Balm, Lemon Verbena, Mint, Pineapple Sage, Rosemary, Sage, Sweet Marjoram, Thyme (Often delicious for their leaves, flowers or seeds)

Additional Resources

Edible Flowers 7.237 by S.E. Newman and Steven O'Connor

<https://extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/yard-garden/edible-flowers-7-237/>

Edible Flowers by Julie Weisenhorn and Ginny Coyle

<https://extension.umn.edu/flowers/edible-flowers>

AMA Handbook of Poisonous and Injurious Plants, Lampe, Kenneth F, 1985. American Medical Association

10-Minute University™ handouts and videos

www.cmastergardeners.org

Master Gardener Advice

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