



Your Container Gardening Guide

By Wendell Aver

Proudly brought to you by Tracy Tutty

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About the Author

Wendell Avery is a keen gardener who loves to experiment with different types of plants and try different methods of getting the best possible results from them.

Wendell credits his parents, both keen and successful gardeners, with inspiring him to grow plants for decoration and food by letting him have his own garden from an early age. He says, "They let me choose what I wanted to grow and gave me a lot of practical help as well as advice."

"But, they made it clear that I would have to do most of the work myself if I wanted to get good results. That is an excellent way to teach children about responsibility and rewards."

Wendell thinks that many people believe that container gardening is mostly useful for people that have limited space to grow anything or are in temporary accommodation and want to take their plants with them when they move on.

This method is a great way for people in those circumstances to add some variety to their diet and color to their home. But, he says that his ebook will show everyone that any sort of gardener will find that containers are useful for almost every gardener, whatever their circumstances and the type of plants which they want to grow.

Wendell says that he gets great satisfaction from sharing many valuable methods and tips with his readers. I have kept it simple, just like I like people to explain anything to me. I hope that some people that aren't into gardening will be inspired to try it when they see that this can be done without requiring a lot of time or effort.

Also, my book shows how to do it all on a tight budget and even actually save money as well. Whatever money and other resources you put into this will be a great investment that will continue to repay you for the rest of your life.

Introduction

There are many reasons for the growing popularity of container gardens.

I was an enthusiastic gardener from my early childhood. It was something I liked to do and my parents encouraged and guided me. I didn't mind getting my hands dirty, being rained on or getting a sore back on occasion before I learned to do the various tasks in ways which reduced that risk.

But, different people have their own reasons for putting time and money into making and maintaining their gardens. I have friends who are keen cooks. They tell me that they grow some of their own herbs. The fresh herbs are tastier than those in packets from the supermarket and they have the satisfaction of doing it themselves.

A neighbor sprouts some of the seed she buys for her caged birds to add variety to their diet and keep them healthy. She also grows some plants which the birds like to eat. I like to grow vegetables and fruit and experiment with different plants. I use containers for new plants which I buy or get from friends.

With the exploding population and the pressure on the available land, many people are living in smaller homes than we used to have. Container gardens give us the opportunity to brighten up our homes for ourselves and our visitors. Containers also allow us to grow some plants which are not commonly grown in our area. We can give them special attention and care and get great satisfaction from producing something special with our own efforts.

One important thing which all gardeners should remember:

Many people give up quickly after something doesn't give them the results they expected.

The mark of a successful gardener is that they use their failures as lessons, not excuses to stop trying.

Learn from any failures and they can become the seeds of greater success.

Gardening on a Budget

Any type of gardening will require an investment of time, energy and, of course money. I know that people have only limited amounts of all three, but that's not a problem which cannot be overcome. We just have to match what we do with the resources we can afford to invest.

I will share with you some ways that will help you to get a better return from your efforts. Some will appeal more to some readers than others. They are all practical, not just theory, and based on the combined experience of many gardeners. Some of these tips are here in this section for easy reference but I have also mentioned some in the other chapters where they relate to those particular topics.

Although it's nice to save money, I suggest you check a few suppliers and stick with one you believe that you can trust even if they are sometimes a little more expensive than some competitor. You can save money by grabbing specials from different suppliers at various times, but I've found that staying loyal to one nursery can be a good idea. I value the advice which they can match to what they've learned from what I've bought and asked about over the years.

I don't expect to get free plants (that's their living!) but they sometimes add some small extra to what I've purchased. The reliable advice and quality has been worth a lot to me.

Cheap and Free Plants

There are many ways to add new plants to your garden without incurring much cost. Here are some ideas, but you will also find others mentioned in various parts of this ebook.

Other Gardeners

This is the most obvious and also probably the one which is most abused. Gardeners are usually generous with their time and advice. Most are also happy to give you cuttings and even seeds or sometimes even plants they have no use for if you ask. But, many become frustrated after their generosity has been taken for granted too many times.

If you are prepared to repay the favor with your own cuttings and show understanding when they say they cannot give you something, you'll probably have few problems and maintain the relationship.

Councils

Does your local council organize a plant sale each year, like the one where I live? Our council started it as a give-away for local residents but there were complaints about people abusing the offer, so they changed the arrangement to

a low-cost plant sale. Now, a different recognized charity provides some volunteers to help on the day and gets the proceeds in return.

I think this is a win-win for all concerned. The plants are those which are grown in the Park's department nursery but are excess to the number needed for their parks and gardens. The cost of the event is minimal because no paid staff, apart from those who would already be working in that location are needed.

But, some of the other staff from the Department usually volunteers for a couple of hours to provide expert advice to the people that buy the plants. Often, there are some knowledgeable gardeners among the volunteers who represent the nominated charity as well. The charity (a different one each year) does well, and the locals get access to a wide variety of plants at low prices. Some are encouraged to improve the appearance of their properties and some may even be inspired to take up gardening, maybe for the first time.

The plants are always in good condition and all of them are varieties which are known to do well in our area. There are usually some varieties which are expensive to get from nurseries and a few which are probably not widely available at all. If your council or equivalent doesn't do this, it might be worthwhile suggesting it to someone.

Gardening Clubs

All gardeners will probably find the cost of membership to a local Garden Club will be far below the value which they can get from the knowledge and support available in the clubs.

Most members willingly share their experience, except maybe for a few special secrets they have discovered, and also encourage less experienced gardeners. All they ask in return is that those who benefit from their advice and help, show some enthusiasm and give feedback after they try the tips they are given. Many clubs have arrangements with resellers of gardening equipment and other supplies which allow members some quite handy discounts. But, you can also save money by listening to the recommendations and warnings about different suppliers from other members.

You can sometimes get some hard-to-find plants at very reasonable prices from other members, along with very valuable tips from their own direct experience growing that particular sort of plant. This can save you much frustration and almost guarantee great results from your efforts.

Community Groups

Some groups, apart from those which are focused on gardening, have fund-raising events such as boot sales etc., which often have people offering plants from their own gardens at really friendly prices.

Again, buying at these events will also usually get you some advice from the actual growers which will be particularly relevant to you as they live in the same area as you do. Boot sales and other events are also good places to find second hand gardening books too.

Your Own Plants

This is another obvious source, but few people know how to do it well enough to be consistently successful.

Your Food Scraps

Many of the vegetables we eat could be grown from the parts which we throw away or put in our compost bin or worm farm. It often only needs a little thought and action to start growing your own and reducing your dependence on restocking from the store every time.

Not all varieties used by commercial growers these days will be suitable for growing future crops because some are modified to produce just one generation. Your best chances of success will probably be when you get the food from farmers' markets or true organic food suppliers.

Many seeds that are supplied in packets can only be expected to produce one crop that will often not reliably produce seeds suitable for germination. That is supposed to encourage you to buy more seeds next time. I hope this tactic will backfire on the seed companies which do it, but only time will tell.

This information just encouraged me to start collecting seeds from our food and generous friends that we shared our seeds with. That gives us better produce and we can rely on them being safe because we know there are no strange chemicals applied to the ones we grow ourselves!

Some potatoes sold through stores in some places may be treated or modified to reduce sprouting which makes them less useful. If you like the taste of a particular variety, it can be worthwhile to put a couple aside. If they produce healthy sprouts after short time, replant them in your garden.

Garlic is one plant that is easy to reproduce. Just "divide and conquer"!

Pull apart the cloves from one bulb and plant them separately. You will get plenty of new bulbs. You can really save money this way.

Other plants which you can reproduce include shallots, beetroot and peas. (Use only large, firm peas and dry them thoroughly before it is time to plant.)

My favorite is probably pumpkin. Harvest the seeds from your favorite variety and plant a few at the right time.

I eat pumpkin seeds and I like them. I am told they are good for almost anyone, but please check for yourself before doing this. If you gather more seeds from your various plants than you need, please don't throw them away. Share them with friends or other gardeners you know.

Watering Tips

Although you may have only a few plants in containers to provide water to, there can still be problems.

These tips will help you to reduce the amount of time and water needed to keep your plants thriving. Mulch, (coir is recommended where it is available at a reasonable price) on top of the growing medium will help to reduce water loss through evaporation. Mixing some perlite or vermiculite in the growing medium will help retain water and nutrients for the plants to use. All commercial potting mixtures are likely to have one of those two substances in them.

Check the label of any growing medium which you buy for the items I mention in this ebook and compare the comparative amounts in different brands or even different packs from the same company. Yes, they can vary widely and it's not always the contents of the most colorful pack which will give you the most colorful plants.

Your local nursery or garden store may have their own mixtures which are always worth considering. They make them locally from ingredients which they use themselves and their reputation depends on keeping their customers happy.

Choosing and Preparing Your Containers

Ceramic pots, provided they have adequate drainage holes, are a good general choice for container gardens. Plastic pots hold warmth in, and plants in them are likely to need more water. If they are deprived for even a short time, they may suffer. Clay pots may tend to let water drain away more quickly than others.

Check all Containers Carefully

Whatever the source of your containers, you must be careful that you do not take on any risks to your plants or your family through contamination of the food which you produce in them.

Free and Low Cost Containers

I already mentioned that you can save money by recycling old containers and other items to use in your container gardening. The limits really only depend on how willing you are to experiment and your imagination.

Egg cartons

A friend advised me to use egg cartons to raise my seeds and then I remembered that we had done this in my first couple of years at school too. This is probably the best use for them as the fiber is too weak to be useful to paper recyclers and they can't be re-used for food.

Put the seeds in the cups and put the lid underneath to reduce the amount of moisture which seeps through onto your bench. Ensure that the cups and the material in them are always moist. Don't let them get warm or dry out. The seedlings can be planted while still in the fiber container which will be dissolved by moisture and bacteria in the soil. There are plenty of other possibilities as well.

Take-away containers can be used for starting plants off. Use plastic ones for plants which don't mind being transplanted.

For the plants which may suffer if they are transferred from their seed container into the garden or container, I recommend that you use either egg cartons or other thin cardboard waste like cardboard toilet rolls and boxes. Some of them will provide no real barrier to the expanding roots of your young plants, but it is better to remove the container when the plant starts to develop. This is how you can do that without causing unnecessary shock to the more delicate plants.

When you want to plant them in larger containers, just make tears almost completely through the small container. Then, put the container with the seedling still in it in the container where you want it. Tear the original container completely apart and remove it by gently pulling the cardboard up and away.

Then, just add a little more potting medium around the seedling. That should not cause any shock or other damage to the plant. It also means that you get some extra use out of the odd cardboard container before adding to your other materials for recycling.

Pools

If you can get a small, cheap kid's pool, or you have one which your own children have outgrown, you can use it for aquatic plants or even regular plants if you provide suitable growing medium and adequate drainage.

There are many other types of containers including hanging baskets, grow bags (woven cloth or even plastic shopping bags!) and hydroponics. Some people put their containers under fluorescent or high intensity discharge lighting. Some use small covers with plastic or glass sides.

Kids and Container Gardens

It's very important to let your children choose how much they become involved in the garden. If they feel even the slightest pressure to do it, they might start to lose their natural enthusiasm. I love the time I can spend in my garden and it's become more special since our daughter has started to join me from time to time. She would watch me when she was very young and I would just tell her about what I was doing and a little about the different plants and creatures which we saw.

Now she is six, Jane has started to ask questions. Some are about things in our garden and others are about something she saw or was told by one of her young friends. When I was sure that she liked to "help" with the gardening, I asked her if she would like to grow some plants herself. I was really glad when she said, "yes". We could have marked off a small patch in the regular garden but I set up a row of pots because I felt that would be enough for her to manage and also be much easier for her to work with. Then, we talked about what she would like to grow.

Some of her ideas were a bit ambitious, but we started with some flowers in a couple of the pots and food plants in the others. Some of the plants were bought, but we also used a few cuttings from the regular garden. Jane was happy to help with setting up the growing medium and her mother liked the idea that using the pots rather than a patch in the garden would reduce the amount of soil she got on her clothes and herself.

If you have more than one child, encourage them to cooperate. They might be a bit competitive – that's natural. But, you need to ensure that you are even-handed in your support and praise to each of them, even when one might be getting consistently better results. You will find that older children will usually enjoy showing their siblings how well they do what you showed them. You are not only helping the children to learn something which will benefit them throughout their lives, each of you will build a store of enjoyable memories which will last that long too.

Get pictures of them doing the planting and other tasks, as well as of any successes which they have. That will make the pictures more appealing to the wider family and also demonstrate to the children themselves that doing the work is an important part of the whole project. I suggest that you start with some plants which are quick growing, so that there is not too long between the start of the project and some results appearing.

When they have seen some results and filled a vase with flowers they grew themselves, or tasted the first fruit from their own garden, it will be less likely that they will become bored while they wait for their next plants to produce visible results. You could suggest plants such as beans, parsley, nasturtiums or even some herbs. But, avoid suggesting any fruit or vegetable which they don't like to eat unless, perhaps, if they know it is something that another member of their family really likes.

It's almost inevitable that some plants will fail despite their best efforts. It happens to every gardener I know from time to time. That will help them to understand a very valuable lesson. I suggest that you be supportive and perhaps tell them about some of the plants which you lost at some time. I would not always just buy similar replacements.

Instead, you could encourage them to focus on the other plants which they are growing and let them have a little time to decide whether they want more of that plant which failed or to try something different. You could encourage them to recycle old food containers for growing some of their plants or the germinate seeds and cuttings. If you can find or buy a large glass bottle or even a small aquarium, they can grow some plants in them which might not be able to survive in your normal environment.

While they are learning to become good gardeners, they will also be doing things which reinforce what they learn at school, from math to biology and other subjects.

Benefits of Growing in Containers

A few containers can be very useful even for people that have a regular garden.

Maintain a full display: You can move some decorative plants which only flower for part of the year to a container so that you can put more plants which are about to flower in your regular garden to keep the display fresh and colorful for your family and friends.

Prevent spread: There are some plants which are notorious for quickly spreading over any area where they are planted. They smother other plants which also inhabit those areas. That can be less of a problem in you plant them in a pot or other container and then put that in the main garden.

Then, the plant can add to the visual pleasure of the display without you having to risk that it could crowd out the other plants which you have there.

Experimenting: You can experiment with new varieties or types of plants without having to make room or change your current plan for the area until you are sure that it will thrive and give you the result that you want from it.

Containers make it possible for you to try plants that are uncommon in your area. If you are in a cool area, you can try to grow plants which require warmer conditions by making a small wooden or wire frame. Then, cover it with a plastic sheet and use that to try plants which need more warmth or just a little better protection from your environment than the other plants you have.

You can buy these ready made, with flaps in the plastic sheet or even windows on hinges so that you can vary the amount of warmth around the plants. I found

they were very easy to make. I am no carpenter but I was so pleased with the results from the plants in my original temporary frame, I bought some wood, sheeting and a couple of small windows. I had some screws and hinges I'd salvaged from some wooden shelves which I threw out before. In a weekend, I made a frame, hinged the windows to the top section of the frame and set up a few plants in containers inside.

The plants are comfortable in cold weather because I keep the windows closed. When I think they might have a bit too much warmth in the warmer months, I prop the windows open and let the outside air circulate around them. I have plans for a bigger unit, but I will probably get someone to make that for a price.

I know my limitations after building the smaller unit and also the benefits I will get from one which is a bit larger. And a professional or even an experienced amateur can do the whole thing in a lot less time than I would need!

Container Gardens are More Accessible

One of the most important benefits of growing plants in containers is probably that they give many more people the opportunity to have a garden.

Container gardening allows people who have only a limited budget or not much space (even no ground area for a traditional garden at all), to enjoy the experience of growing decorative plants and even produce some of their own food!

I know people that have physical problems which restrict their mobility, but have found container gardening within their capabilities. They also often get some measurable benefits to their general health and well-being from being active and productive in this way. The health benefits of having growing plants in your home are well documented too.

Improving Your Environment

The visual appeal makes for a more pleasant environment, the plants help to keep the air cleaner through photosynthesis and also add their pleasing perfumes which are much better than the simulated aromas we expel from those cans of smell-smothering deodorizers. Container gardens let you have a wider choice of plants and more variety to spread around, even if your home is relatively small.

There are a variety of plants which are suitable for your climate, wherever you live, so you can be sure that you will find some which appeal to you and even change your plants, if you want different colors to match when you change your decor.

Even where space is very limited, a few containers can quickly add color and interest to your home and also improve the health of the area for your family. Container gardening can be enjoyed even by people on a limited budget. We can

adapt a variety of containers to fill with plants instead of going the expensive route of buying specially-made ones.

And, many plants can be propagated from plants we already have, so we don't have to buy more. With decorative plants, the cuttings or seeds will often produce some colors that you don't already have which will add more variety to your garden.

Producing Food

You can grow plants which are small or even get special dwarf varieties of many fruits.

Some of these plants can produce more than one variety of a particular type of fruit and there are even some plants which have more than one type of fruit, thanks to clever and repeated grafting. I guarantee the first time you pick and some fruit, herbs or vegetables off your very own plants, even with the basic varieties, you will be so impressed by the flavor that you will probably make plans to increase the number and variety of plants you have!

Worms – the Gardener’s Best Friend

If you have enough space, there are great benefits to be gained by setting up a worm farm where the red worms will turn selected scraps from your kitchen into compost which can be used to improve the results from your plants significantly.

Red worms or tiger worms are most commonly used for worm farms. The common garden worm is not suitable for use in the worm farm. Some people have told me that they understand the benefits are real, but don't want to be bothered with worms or compost because of the time commitment and especially the smell. But, all of my friends that have tried this have found the possible drawbacks are usually overstated and that they really get a lot of benefits from having their own worm farm.

As well as recycling some of your kitchen and garden waste, your worms will also produce excellent fertilizer in the form of worm casts which you should be able to start harvesting in reasonable quantities after a couple of months. The other product is liquid waste from your worms which collects in the base of your worm farm and is extracted through a plastic tap. This is also very good for use around your garden.

Making your own worm farm is outside the scope of this ebook. But it is something which I believe would benefit any gardener, even if they were only setting up a few posts at this stage. Also, though it is not difficult to set up a worm farm, especially the currently available commercial products, it needs to be done with reasonable care so that you get a reliable and efficient unit which will give you years of service without any problems for you or the slippery residents.

So, I will just give you a broad outline and mention some of the proven benefits which I believe make them a good investment. You can set up your worm farm in a shady area or room. Make sure that it is level so that the liquid flows to the catching tray at the bottom and also to reduce the risk of it tipping over.

Your thousand worms are weighed, not counted, but suppliers routinely add about 5% or so to the bag to ensure you get value. Keep the area around your worm farm warm but never hot. Ensure that the material in the farm is always moist. I suggest that you check what commercial units are available in your area. They vary in size and features but look for something which is simple to set up and maintain.

The worms do more than recycle some of your kitchen scraps. They produce compost and "worm juice" which is high in nutrients. You usually get this from a tap near the bottom of the apparatus.

Some of your kitchen scraps, including tea (and most teabags, salad scraps and used coffee) will help your worms to thrive, but some items, like onions and meat etc., can cause them problems.

Worms are usually supplied in a minimum of a thousand. That number fits easily into a medium-sized paper bag and you probably will not need to ever buy any more if you keep their living quarters in good condition. They will breed readily but don't imagine that you will find yourself over-run by hordes of them. Their population is regulated by their environment and the amount of suitable food which you make available to them. Their food should be provided in small pieces which the worms can process comfortably and quickly.

Don't give them too much at any time. About a half an inch is sufficient in one layer. Onions, meat or citrus scraps will cause problems for the worms and may also attract vermin. Meat, especially, will become smelly quickly and this will probably be bad enough to be detected outside the worm farm.

You can put shredded newspaper between layers of scraps in your worm farm but I recommend that you put your printed newspaper in your recycling bin as I think that some ink which is used by some newspapers may not be suitable. The comfort of your worms is vital for success.

The worms will be okay if the food supply is low for a while but they must always have sufficient but not too much moisture. I suggest that you pay a couple of dollars and buy the end of a roll of blank newsprint from your local newspaper publisher. That will provide a much more suitable material for your worm farm and also be suitable for your family to draw on.

Blank newsprint is very useful for conferences and business meetings. I have used it for informal banners as well as brain-storming sessions and mind-maps! You could even keep most of the roll for your business use and just put thin layers of the scrap pieces into the farm for your worms.

Plan Before You Plant

There are several things which must be taken into consideration. If you don't, you are likely to run into problems which could reduce your enjoyment and other benefits from the whole exercise.

The first thing you must do is to make a realistic assessment of your local environment and other factors which will affect the success of your garden. Then, you will have a good idea whether the plants which you want to grow will be happy in your area or whether, if you decide to experiment with ones which are not common in your area, about how much extra time and other resources you might need to have any success with them.

Almost everyone draws up at least a rough plan for their new layout. And, they usually give the plants the right size of container and take care to provide good quality growing medium. That's essential. But, some encounter problems later on because the areas which were originally allotted for the different plants did not allow for the size of the containers which the plants might need when they were fully grown. If that happens, you'll have to make some hard decisions

about what plants to give away or move to a different area if you have more space. The next thing you must decide is what you want to get from your container garden.

Choosing a Growing Medium

Your choice of the growing medium you use and how well you maintain it will have a lot of bearing on the results you get for your efforts. I can give some suggestions but you will have to consider the type of plants you grow and the weather patterns and general environment in your area before making a final decision about the type of growing medium which you will use.

Should you use Soil?

Some people feel that if they are getting good results in their regular garden area, they can just put some of that soil into their containers. Unfortunately, that is often less likely to give results which they could get by using a specially prepared soil-less mix.

I always prefer to use a prepared medium which does not contain any soil for my containers. It's difficult for many gardeners to know what they might need to add to their regular garden soil when they want to use it for the plants they decide to grow in containers. The content of the commercial mixtures is known. When you use them, you can easily work out if you might want to add a little more Perlite, vermiculite or other substance to accommodate particular requirements for your plant or the area you live in.

If you are using soil from other areas it can be difficult to ensure that it is completely safe with no bugs, diseases or deficiencies which cause problems that might not become obvious until much later. That could mean that you have wasted a lot of time, money and energy but cannot expect any good results from it at all.

Your compost or soil should be porous enough for the water you apply to be able to get down to the roots. If you are in an area where your plants will be subject to warm periods or if you are unable to water them regularly, you should seriously consider adding some vermiculite or Perlite which will store some of the water for later use by the plant.

The mixtures are usually lighter than an equivalent amount of garden soil.

I have explained what some of the most common ingredients of commercial mixtures are and what advantages they give to your plants in the reference section at the back of the ebook.

The Downside of Using Peat Moss

Peat moss is produced from wetlands in several countries. Horticulture is the main user of peat though some has been used for centuries as a low-cost fuel and some is used as an important part of the production of malt whiskey as well

as a means of retaining water around plants and reducing weed growth where it is used as mulch.

As a result of the claimed problems caused by its production, many gardening experts and conservationists are campaigning for it to be banned completely. They say that there are other materials readily available which can match or surpass its ability to store water and nutrients (coir for one).

Its use by gardeners has a long history and it is still very popular, especially for container gardening. But, there are now other products which can be used in its place which may even give you better results over time. Wherever it is used, it needs to be supported by perlite or another material which will preserve good drainage when the peat starts to break down.

The main problem with peat is that the mining process destroys the habitat above it. That habitat supports many important species and the still living sphagnum moss which covers the peat at the surface. This moss helps to keep the air clean. When it is removed, it can take many years for new moss to appear and even longer for a viable ecostructure to be established.

A few of each of the creatures that were dependent on the increasingly rare sphagnum moss environment will probably survive but they may never again reach the necessary population size in that area to have any guarantee of their continued survival. Some ancient artifacts are believed to be preserved in some of the layers, so some of humankind's early history may also be lost because of this destruction. The production and transport of peat moss is claimed to have a negative effect on the environment. Coir peat may also be cheaper than the real peat.

Keep in mind that some coir may have too much salt to be suitable for some applications. You need to be sure that using the coir you are offered will not cause this problem over time. Peat breaks down too readily to be of long-term use. When it breaks down, it repels water, which means you have to add other stuff like Perlite, repot your plants or risk them being seriously affected.

I believe peat production will decline but there are already viable alternatives for your garden if you want to use them. I'm not sure if the scotch drinkers will be happy though!

Pests and other Problems

All gardeners need to be on watch for pests and diseases. Some pests like wooden planters too, so it will be worthwhile to keep an eye on them. The problems are likely to be most damaging if any of your plants are sick or have not enough water or correct nourishment.

Following a written plan for the regular maintenance of your containers and their contents will go a long way to stopping most pests getting a hold. For instance,

examining your plants when you are watering them is a good way to check for problems.

Some people think that they will see any problems without taking any special effort because they will be so obvious. Unfortunately, fixing the problem when you actually see severe damage will be relatively difficult and sometimes impossible without destroying some plants. Even if your efforts to remedy the situation are successful, you will have extra expense, lost valuable time, impaired the health of the plants (if they survive) and they will probably produce less flowers or fruit in the future.

Many problems can only be detected in the early stages by careful, regular examination of the plants and the medium. Some common signs to be aware of are:

- Are some of the leaves or stems curling or losing their shine?
- Is there a crust starting to form on the surface of the soil?
- Are some plants noticeably smaller or weaker than the others of that kind which you have?
- Start looking at the underside of the leaves of your plants for scale insects and other bugs.

Insects bite, chew or remove sections. Ants eat plant roots and leaves. If you see them on your plants or evidence of their feeding there, removing their nest, which is likely to be close, is probably the best way to solve the problem.

Tool Tips

If you want the best results from your container gardening, you will need some tools. Although you can get suitable tools at very low prices, I suggest that you invest in quality tools, just as you would with tools for your regular garden or your car.

The cheap tools may last a season or less than a week! When you consider the comparable cost, include the extra trips to the store, parking and your time (which you could have spent at home doing something enjoyable, like gardening instead of fighting traffic and crowds) in with the actual difference between the two types of tools.

When you are gardening mostly in containers, you will probably have less lifting and carrying to do. But, you might want to buy a handcart to take the pressure off your back when you have several containers or just a few big ones to move around. Another simple device, which many of you might even be able to put together yourself is a strong board on a timber frame with a heavy duty wheel or castor at each corner. I bought one on a whim because of the special price that week and it has been one of the best investments I have made.

I have used it a lot with the garden and other items, and the rest of the family have found uses for it with their hobby equipment, stereos etc. If you use a regular garden hose to water your container plants, get a nozzle which lets you diffuse the water so that you can soften the impact of the spray on the more delicate plants. Another very useful device is a small sprayer which fits on the end of the hose. These sprayers come in a variety of designs, but they all have either a small tank or a small diameter hose with a weight on the other end which you drop into a bucket.

You put the recommended amount of liquid or dissolvable fertilizer or pesticide in the tank or the bucket and the valve in the sprayer adds a measured amount of the chemical to the water as it is sprayed from the hose. These are based on a very old system but are still very useful.

You will have to keep your containers as well as your plants clean. Use a stiff brush to get any unwanted deposits off your containers. Disposable cloths, either synthetic ones from the supermarket or a bag of cloths made from discarded clothing from the local charity waste cloth recyclers, works pretty well. Some particularly useful items are:

Trowel, fork and rake: The basic tools which every gardener needs in an appropriate size for their gardens.

Mist sprayer: Container gardeners can just use a small pressure sprayer to add some moisture to an area to increase humidity around your plants.

Weed lifter: This acts as a fulcrum when these come in a variety of designs. The basic idea is a handle with a V-shaped notch at the opposite end. This notched end is usually at an angle to the main shaft. Some also have a flat piece of metal behind the notch.

You push the notch into the soil with the two sides of the notch going either side of the weed. Then, you push the handle toward the growing medium. The metal plate acts as a fulcrum and makes it easier for you to lever all or most of the weeds' roots out of the soil in one motion.

A pH testing kit is worth considering if you become serious about getting the best results from your gardening. A moisture meter to indicate the amount of moisture in the growing medium is also useful. An aerator which is like a small fork with hollow tines which draw small cores from the medium to improve drainage and help fertilizer etc., get right down to the roots if your soil is highly compacted, but you can get good results by using your small fork. Just push the fork into the medium and then bend it slightly forward and back.

A better solution if your medium is drying out is to add perlite or coir peat. But, you may realize that you have not been watering frequently enough. Every gardener also needs a pair of **secateurs**. But, for the sake of your plants and your own hands, please get a quality pair which will be easier to use and keep sharp. Then, each cut you make will be neat and impose less stress on the plant.

The quality fitting will ensure that the blades are really safely closed when you set the lock and the smooth action will make your hands less tired.

Repotting

You will need to transfer or repot your plants from time to time. Here are some signs that you need to repot your plant:

- The plant roots start to show on the surface of the growing medium or through the holes in the base of its current container.
- When you see any indication that your plant is not thriving as it was before. This may be because it is not getting adequate nourishment from the growing medium.

If there is any sign of disease or insects in the old growing medium, you should give the plant an optimum start by removing every trace of any damaged areas on the plant and the entire old growing medium from its roots before you set it into the new container. Sometimes, you can just gently shake or pick the old medium off it. But, if there is too much or it's very hard to remove, you might put the roots of the plant into a container of water to loosen the material so that it is easier to ensure that you get it all off.

It is very important that you don't. Most plants are unlikely to need repotting for at least a couple of years as long as the previous container had enough room for it to grow and the growing medium had sufficient nutrients and other quality ingredients to support it.

If you can, always plan to move your plants when they are in a less active or dormant stage. For most plants, this will be after winter and before they start to produce flowers and other new growth or at the end of harvesting. Not all plants

are alike in this regard. There are some, like camellias, which may be least active while there are flowers showing.

When you transfer any of your plants, give them a container which allows an extra couple of inches and no more. If the lower part of the container is too big, some plants may develop more roots and less flowers or fruit. Ensure that you have all your supplies, especially potting mix, and space when you start to repot your plants.

Usually, you repot a plant to a larger pot so that it has space to continue growing and its root system is not restricted. But, if you are only repotting the plant because the potting medium seemed to be exhausted or contaminated, you might decide to repot it in the same container. Be sure to thoroughly clean the old container to ensure there are no bugs or other problems.

When you set up your containers, always leave a space of about one to two inches between the top of your medium and the rim of the container. That space will hold the water you spray or pour onto your container until it is absorbed. It will also allow enough space for the roots to expand around the plant, so that you won't need to repeat this exercise for a reasonable time, possibly two to four years.

You should water most plants a couple of hours before you plan to repot them. They will be easier to lift if the medium is well-moistened. But, don't give them so much water that they might risk becoming waterlogged. Make the transfer as comfortable for the plant as possible. Turn the container upside down. Either you, or a helper, should ensure the plant does not fall out while you remove the plant from the container.

Don't put pressure on the plant by trying to pull it out of the container. Examine the roots of the plant. You can expect that they will be a little compressed – that's why we are giving it a bigger container. If the roots seem tightly compressed, you can try to gently loosen them. Cut off any damaged roots with a sharp pair of secateurs or scissors which you keep for use with your plants. Whatever you use must be very sharp to minimize any impact on your plants.

Some gardeners are reducing the amount of crock or small stones which they used to put in the bottom of the containers or even eliminating it altogether. I still use it the way my parents taught me because I have not had any problems doing that. Remember the crock should only be enough to provide some drainage right at the bottom of the container. If you put in a lot or have it completely cover the bottom of the container, then it will reduce the drainage available and this can cause harm to your plants.

Set the plant in the container and loosely fill the area around it with your new potting medium. You should never set the plant any deeper in the new container than it was in its previous home. This can cause some setback during the plant's adaptation to the new surroundings.

If you might not be able to remember exactly how deep it was previously, either run a marking pen around the plant at the level of the medium before you remove it from the old container or loosely twist a garden tie around the plant near that point. With many plants, there may be a visible change in the color of its stem at that point which could be a sufficient guide for you.

Add the new medium in stages and tap the container gently each time to remove some of the air pockets in the soil. Then, press the soil down but don't overdo this because you don't want the soil to be too firm.

Most plants will appreciate a generous amount of water after you finish the repotting process. I generally water the plant until the first drops appear through the drainage holes in the bottom of the container.

The Most Popular Containers

Although there are still millions of the traditional clay plant pots sold every year, gardeners often develop their own designs based on their experience and adapt many other items to substitute for the clay pots.

Baskets

I think people like the hanging baskets but some are put off trying them because they may think that they are hard to set up and must require a lot of maintenance. Whatever sort of basket you use (solid or open-weave), use strong material to hang it from. When you are setting up your baskets, remember to allow for the weight the basket and the plants it contains will be when they reach their full size.

Check the condition of the basket and its support regularly. Before deciding where to put your basket, you need to work out how to prevent any damage from anything leaking or falling from the basket. And, of course, you have to consider whether the plant you will have in the basket is suited to the temperatures and amount of sunlight which you get there. Balconies and window ledges can be windier and a lot warmer or colder than the rest of your home.

Setting up a regular hanging basket is fairly simple. If you are growing an especially delicate plant, check with your supplier about any particular requirements and precautions. Use a suitable liner. You can get some made from coir which are better for the environments than peat moss. Your basket may be very simple which is the way to start and also usually the cheapest.

If you might forget to water your baskets, you can get some with an inbuilt reservoir but you still need to keep that filled! Add a small amount of growing material. Many people have plants growing out of the side of their baskets as well as the top. Just poke holes in the liner from the sides of the basket at the appropriate points and then gently push your plants into the holes. Make sure the hole is just big enough that you don't compress the plants. Then, put a little more medium into the remaining space to anchor the small plant.

Remember to add plants from all sides of the basket if there is room. Use short, showy plants in the top part of the container. Set the container up before you water it gently.

Plastic Bags and other Containers

All sorts of plastic containers are used for plant containers. They are usually cheap and most are light, so they are easy to move around. But, they are not usually porous, so the potting material may become dry fairly quickly and the temperature inside some types may become uncomfortable for the plants.

Using (new) plastic rubbish bins has proved successful for strawberries and other fruits and decorative plants. They are usually okay to use for vegetables which produce their crop above the ground.

In plastic containers, root vegetables like potatoes can become hard to harvest because the growing material dries out. You might cut away the container but that means replacing it for the following year and put the remains of the previous one in the trash. Some people have used supermarket plastic bags as cheap substitutes for commercial growing bags. They just fill the bags with potting mix, after putting some holes in the bottom for drainage and, with larger bags, putting some holes for extra plants in the sides.

This is one way of getting some extra use out of the plastic bag, but it eventually has to go in the trash anyway.

Maintaining Your Container Garden

Clean Your Containers

If you always buy new containers, you should still clean them before use. If you want to use some containers which you got from someone else, you need to:

Check what has been in them before: some used containers may look to be ideal for your plants but, they may have residues on them or even soaked into the material of the container which means they are unsuitable. They could poison your plants or harm anyone that ate anything which you grew in the container.

Check any cracks or decorative parts on the containers: Sometimes, people may not notice some old material in cracks or under decorations on their second -hand containers. That material may contain something which could cause problems later on.

Make sure that you only use safe materials to clean them: Containers made from wood and other porous materials might be contaminated and later on release some of the dangerous material back into your growing medium. That could cause harm to the plants or anyone that ate them.

Winter Chores for Your Containers

There are some important tasks to do when the growing season is over to give your container garden a good start for next season.

Check your plants: Remove any dead or damaged material. Examine it before throwing it out to try to find out what caused the damage so you can deal with the problem at the appropriate time of the year.

If the plants are pushing roots through the bottom of their container, I note in my diary that I must repot it.

Don't put any material in your compost or worm farm if there is any chance it could have bugs or disease.

Check your containers: Examine the containers carefully. If they have become chipped or damaged in some other way, consider whether to replace them.

The cracks will make them harder to keep clean – small bugs or contaminated material could get into the pot and be hard to spot. Check whether there is still sufficient drainage.

Check the growing medium: If the material has dried out, your plants will suffer. There may be a crust or spots of dried salts on the surface which probably comes from fertilizer which has too much salt in it, or perhaps the drainage is not good enough to get the excess liquid out of the pot before it dries on the surface.

I tag all my plants with the common name, date of planting and when I intend to repot it, if necessary. I also have a gardening diary where I list jobs to be done, any special results and any problems or questions which I need to follow up about.

My diary is about the size of a small paperback book. Some years, I get one from a gardening company which also has useful tips and some fairly interesting advertisements. Otherwise, I get a small gardening guide and stick the diary back to back with it. Then, I can check the guide for any problems I see while I am actually gardening.

Choosing Plants for Your Container Garden

I've included some links to lists of plants for different parts of the country and the World in the resources section, rather than try to cover all of the areas which I don't personally know about or just concentrate on the areas I am familiar with and disappoint readers who are outside of those areas.

I've written a small section on herbs because they are popular all over. If you haven't tried producing some of your own herbs, I hope you will read this and then give yourself and your family some extra flavor in their lives.

Herbs

Herbs are very suitable for your first attempt at growing plants in a container garden. It can teach you most of the basic procedures for successfully growing other plants in containers. It might encourage you to experiment with herbs you haven't used before for your cooking.

Most require up to about five hours of sun a day, but there are some herbs which can get along with less. Some herbs are sensitive about contacting

fertilizer, so only use it sparingly. Keeping the herbs watered is fairly easy. They prefer less rather than more, so good drainage is essential.

You can have more than one kind of herb in the same container but they must be herbs which have similar watering needs.

Fertilizer

I don't fertilize the plants after repotting them for at least two weeks because the medium I use, like most commercial mixes, has some slow release fertilizer incorporated in it.

Over-fertilizing at any stage can cause serious problems for your plants.

The fertilizer you use will depend on the needs of the particular plants which you grow, the stage of growth they are at and which of their needs are not already supplied by the nutrients in the growing medium. Most fertilizer is applied to the growing medium, but sometimes you can get better results by apply appropriate fertilizers to some plants through their foliage.

If you use a potting mix which has fertilizer in it, you should check that the nutrients and other additives are suitable for the type of plants which you will grow in it. Check with your supplier or with the garden gurus at your Garden club before buying any. Many people use organic fertilizers such as horse or chicken manure. These have their uses but you need to be aware of some facts.

Chicken manure needs to be aged or it may burn your plants. Any manure may contain pests or diseases which could harm your plants. You should always wear quality gloves when handling manure of any kind. There are possible risks for humans as well as plants.

When you are packing up, clean everything you use and which you don't discard completely. If you leave it for next time, thinking you will feel less tired then, you have the risk of any diseased material spreading or drying so hard on your gear that it is almost impossible to shift. For safety sake, do the cleaning when you are packing up.

Over-fertilizing will cause a build-up of some substances which are okay in the small quantities recommended by the manufacturers but can cause problems, including a reduced resistance to attack by disease or pests and damage to parts of the plants. This may show by leaf discoloration as well as less or no growth.

Useful Terms

Annual: Plant which probably won't be worth keeping more than one season. Some may be still productive but replacing them each year is usually better.

Bark: Bark can be useful for mulching open garden areas and containers to reduce the amount of water lost by evaporation on hot days. Bark mulch will also help to reduce the ability of weed seeds to germinate.

It is much preferable to use natural bark rather than black plastic which is often suggested because the plastic will cause the growing medium to rapidly dry out and become warmer, which would cause discomfort to your plants.

Some bark mulch has also been used for an impact absorbing layer on children's playing areas. Not all bark mulch is suitable for this purpose.

Coir: This is a by-product produced when the long fibers from coconuts are used to make brushes and other useful items.

The small left-over pieces and dust are pressed into coir peat which is an increasingly popular as a replacement for peat moss. "Coir peat" is promoted as better than peat moss for gardening because it is recycled from parts of coconuts which would otherwise be wasted

If the salt level of your coir peat has been checked and found acceptable, it has many benefits for gardeners:

- It retains relatively high amounts of water and nutrients.
- It has a narrower range of PH values than peat moss which is very suitable for most types of plants.
- It does not readily compact as much or as quickly as garden soil or peat moss.
- The use of coir is regarded as positive as it reduces the impact on those areas where peat is extracted.

Leaf Mould: Rotted leaves used in potting medium or can be dug into gardens or containers separately.

N.P.K.: These numbers refer to the Nitrogen, Phosphorus and Potassium in the fertilizer you are considering using on your plants.

(N) Nitrogen is an essential part of every living thing. For plants, it assists the rate of growth, is an important part of the (green) chlorophyll which it must have for photosynthesis to happen.

(P) Phosphorus helps with root development.

(K) Potassium is needed in sufficient amounts to assist the building of the plant's internal structure.

Peat Moss: Peat Moss is used as a means of retaining water around plants and reducing weed growth where it is used as mulch.

When the peat starts to break down; it forms a barrier unless you have some other material to preserve drainage, such as Perlite.

Perennial: Plant which is expected to live and produce for more than one year.

Perlite: Perlite is a natural material which comes from volcanoes. It has expanded after being heated. In your garden, it helps to retain water and air for the use of your plants. It looks like hard plastic foam.

Rootbound: Condition suffered by plants which are in containers which are too small for their roots to develop. Sometimes, the gardener has used a pot of sufficient size but left the plant in it too long. Check the bottom of the pot about every six months and see if the drainage holes have roots coming out of them.

Vermiculite: This has a good water retention capacity which reduces the need for watering the plants and also the loss of water from your containers if the soil is loose.

Resources

Plant Suggestions

U.S.A.

Health and Safety in Your Garden. Expert tips in plain language

<http://www.cdc.gov/Features/GardeningTips/>

The University of Idaho offers a wide range of gardening information from its Extension Service

http://www.extension.uidaho.edu/idahogardens/op/cg_plantselection.htm

The University of Vermont provides a long list of plants suitable for container planting, at: **<http://pss.uvm.edu/ppp/pubs/oh70perspcont.pdf#search>**

United Kingdom

The National Vegetable Society NVS is a registered charity which promotes vegetable growing of all types, including container gardens.

<http://www.nvsuk.org.uk/>

The Royal Horticultural Society aims to protect Britain's gardening heritage and help gardeners everywhere

<http://www.rhs.org.uk/>

Australia

Garden Clubs of Australia Inc is an umbrella organization representing about 500 gardening clubs of Australia: **<http://www.gardenclubs.org.au/minigen/>**

Weeds in Australia has all the information Australian gardeners with any size of garden might need about weeds with pictures!

<http://www.weeds.gov.au/>

Yarralumla Nursery in the Australian Capital Territory offers gardeners in that region a wide range of expert gardening advice

http://www.tams.act.gov.au/live/yarralumla_nursery/free_advice

Wendell's Last Words

I hope that you will use some tips from my ebook and it will help make some things about container gardening clearer so that you start getting better results sooner.

I have not tried to suggest I know everything about the subject – I don't. I have tried to share some usable ideas from my experience and also some inspiration which will help you to keep going when you encounter any problems with your gardening adventure. Gardening in containers is a way of producing more color and flavor in your daily life. It is also a hobby without any limits except those you set.

The things about gardening which I most enjoy are helping other people to start or improve their gardens. A special joy is to help children grow their first plants. The first time you taste food you produce yourself, you too will become a confirmed gardener. I hope that you get as much from your garden as I and my family do from ours. I wish you many happy years producing big results from small spaces!

Wendell Avery