

Growing Edibles in Containers



Briana Etie
GCMG 2017

Growing vegetables and fruit in containers can be an answer to space constraints, ease of care, protection from freezes, and accessibility. Containers can provide a beautiful display and be strategically placed to welcome insect helpers as well as protect plants from critter destroyers. I have successfully grown tomatoes, blueberries, and dragon fruit in containers.

When we first moved to Dickinson, spring season for tomatoes was quickly approaching. I could not wait for my husband to construct a garden. I bought three of the biggest pots I could find, then filled them with a mixture of compost, topsoil, and peat moss.

I chose for the first time bush-type, determinate tomato varieties. Previously in San Leon, our indeterminate tomato plants would grow taller than I am. I didn't think I could keep a pot upright at those heights. I first placed the pots on my porch cement. Then when summer started to heat up the concrete, I put them on the grass. When a windy night toppled my pots, I stomped camping stakes into the ground and attached them to the drainage holes to prevent this from happening again. I was very impressed with these determinate bush varieties. They have sturdy, stocky stems and did not need a cage like

indeterminate varieties. I used a four-foot fiberglass pole in the center of the pot, six inches away from the main stem to prevent root damage. I used a green Velcro tie to attach the plant to the pole. I then scalped the grass with a weed trimmer and mounded some compost on the ground about 50-feet away from where my potted tomato plants were located. I planted Mammoth sunflowers. The Leaf-footed bug loves these big, beautiful sunflowers, thankfully more than my tomatoes. I had created a trap crop for the bugs. With the activity of my kids and pets, the plants were not bothered with the birds as much. I grew Patio, Bush Goliath, and Bush Early Girl varieties. All the plants produced a medium slicer type tomato. I had fruit for sandwiches, salads, pasta dishes and a neighbor.

The advantage of growing blueberries in a container is maintaining an acidic soil. Blueberries need an acidic soil pH of 4.0 to 5.5. While you can be successful cultivating blueberries in raised beds, they are more cost effective and easier to maintain in a big container. You can reduce the use of elements like sulfur or fertilizers to acidify your soil. I use a mixture of peat moss, compost and sand. The sand helps your soil mixture with drainage. Many suitable types of soilless peat-based mixes are commercially available and are suitable for growing blueberry in containers. Be sure to incorporate a slow-release fertilizer into the potting mix. Avoid rapid-release, nitrate fertilizers. Alternatively, use an acid-based, water-soluble fertilizer once



Blueberry Pot



Dragonfruit



Dragonfruit

“Containers can provide a beautiful display...”

a month during the growing season after the plants are established. Blueberry plants also like moisture. Monitoring the soil is the best practice with hot summers. Pine bark mulch or pine needles in containers are great to keep the moisture in and weeds out. It is important to stimulate new growth and open the plants to better sun exposure. Blueberry plants can produce new growth each year when pruned correctly. Fruit is produced on growth on one year-old wood. Older, woody stems produce smaller fruit and younger canes larger fruit. It is best to have a different variety bush for cross-compatible pollen that can improve fruit size and production.

My two favorites are early season producers Biloxi and Misty Southern High Bush. They grow to about five feet tall, blooming around the same time. Most Southern High Bush varieties require at least 250 chill hours. Protect your potted bushes if the temperatures are forecasted to be below 28-degrees and there is a wind event.

Dragon fruit (*Selenicereus* sp.) is another edible that is best grown in a container. They do not require much room for roots, but they require a heavy sturdy pot. Metal rolling pots with wagon wheel trellises are available, as well as sturdy pots that are more affordable. Dragon fruit plants prefer a slightly acidic soil with a pH level between 6 and 7. I used a 50/50 soil mixture of topsoil and peat moss. Topsoil is a well-draining soil. Dragon fruit is a tropical climbing cactus, not a desert

cactus. When it reaches 12 inches, it's very important to support the plant. As the plants begin creeping and climbing, use a wood stake or a trellis to support the entire plant. Most simple supports are a central pole or stake, and the cactus is tied to the support. They require plenty of moisture as well as a period of dryness. However, never let the soil completely dry out.

They bloom at night, and the blooms only last one evening. Dragon fruit do not self-pollinate and require a pollinizer to set fruit. While they are pollinated by moths and bats in their native range (tropical regions of Mexico and Central America), they will require hand-pollination for successful production. The fruit will start forming in 30 to 50 days. Regularly trim any dead or damaged growth. The plant will focus its energy on producing blooms instead of growing unnecessary stems or healing damaged stems.

Containers for edibles benefit from pot/planter “feet.” Most feet can improve drainage and airflow; some sturdy versions can help stabilize the container. Creative attachments are available if a whimsical container is desired.

Reference:

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Southern High Bush blueberries GCMG database



Tomatoes in container GCMG database

Enjoy Plants in Hanging Baskets



Elayne Kouzounis
GCMG 1998

Plants displayed in hanging baskets add an extra dimension to the interior or exterior of your home. Many gardeners use hanging baskets due to inadequate growing space. Through the magic of depth and scale, plants displayed in these versatile “mobile homes” can fulfill their needs. A specimen basket can also be precisely that focal point required to make any garden, pool, patio, or deck setting truly outstanding.

Almost any kind of plant that grows well in this Gulf Coast area will grow in some type of container, but certain plant forms adapt more readily to culture in hanging baskets. The latter types of plants usually occur in nature as ground covers, vines, or low-growing plants. However, almost any type of plant, short of those with large taproots, can be grown in a basket or container.

Unwilling to limit themselves to just one plant per basket, many enthusiasts combine several plants very effectively. Semi-upright growing plants can be combined with ground covers or trailing plants to create interesting contrasts of color, shape and texture. Such plants should always be compatible in their requirements for sun and water. Plant combinations can also greatly extend the flowering season and therefore the overall effectiveness of a basket. For example, petunias are outstanding color plants for spring and fall, but as night temperatures become hot, they may fade and may eventually die. But adding a heat-tolerant plant (such as lantana) to the center portion of the basket at planting time, the life of the basket can be extended to nine months. As the petunias begin to fade, they can be cut back, enabling the heat-loving plant to cover the container for maximum effect. Regardless of your preference, hanging baskets can be incorporated into indoor surroundings. True, they do require attention, but their potential advantages far outweigh the extra care they demand.

To plant a solid hanging basket, relatively little effort is required. Select the desired plants, being very generous with quantities, and have on hand a good supply of your favorite potting soil. For a 12-inch basket, six 3-inch pots should be sufficient, one for the center and five around the edges. You may find it advantageous to add vermiculite. This will increase the moisture retention of the soil and reduce the weight of your mix. Place your soil in the basket and then set in the plants. The final soil level in the basket should be about 1/4-inch below the rim, then put the solid hanging basket in the desired location.

Making a wire basket hanging is more of an undertaking, but the results are worth the effort. The first step is to assemble all the components. They are the wire basket frame and hanger wire, sphagnum moss, and potting soil. Secondly, soak the sphagnum moss in water. While it is soaking, you can attach the wire and prepare the hanger at the last. The hanger wire is easier to put on before planting, but it will be harder to work on the basket with the hanger attached, so when to perform this step is strictly a matter of personal choice. Regardless of when the hanger wire is attached, it must be attached to a vertical wire in addition to the top wire rim of the basket to prevent slipping in the wind.

When the moss is thoroughly saturated, you can begin lining the wire frame. Do not be conservative with the moss for a basket of this type. Begin at the bottom of



Baskets raise the level of a seated area.



Mosaic plant (*Fittonia albivenis*) looks great in a basket.



Texas Superstar® geranium baskets. (tamu.edu)

“Plants displayed in versatile ‘mobile homes’...”

the basket with about a 3-inch layer and work your way up to the top by overlapping the layers and maintaining the same thickness.

When you get to the top wire, apply enough moss over and around it so that you cannot feel the wire when you squeeze the moss. This step is very important, because the rim is where the maturing plants will be cascading over the side of the basket, and it is necessary to create a cushion for the plant stems so that their weight or the movement of the wind will not cause them to be rubbed or pinched.

After being satisfied that you have adequately lined the basket with moss, you can fill the cavity with your favorite soil mix. As a rule, about twelve 3-inch pots should be used in a 16-inch basket. About fifteen 3-inch pots will be sufficient in a 20-inch basket.



Splashes of color MG Karolyn Gaphart



Succulents do well in baskets. MG Elayne Kouzounis

Thoroughly water the basket and observe any settling in the soil. The final soil level should be just below the top wire of the basket so that a reservoir is formed for sufficient and uniform watering. You are now ready to display the arrangement.

Watering and fertilizing procedures are the most important considerations for maintenance to maintain the quality of the plants.

Plants for sunny locations for hanging baskets are many. Some examples are

Allamanda (*Allamanda cathartica*)

Asparagus ‘Meyers’ or ‘Sprengeri’ (*Asparagus densiflorus*)

Bougainvillea

Dwarf crape myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*)

Donkey’s or Burro’s tail (*Sedum morganianum*)

Creeping fig (*Ficus pumila*)

Firecracker plant (*Russelia equisetiformis*)

Hoya

Ice plant (*Delosperma cooperi*)

Lantana (*Lantana camara*)

Periwinkle or vinca (*Catharanthus roseus*)

Plumbago (*Plumbago auriculata*)

Purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*)

Trailing jade (*Kleinia petraea*)

Verbena (*Verbena officinalis*)

Upright plants for hanging baskets.

Chenille (*Acalypha hispida*)

Copper plant (*Acalypha wilkesiana*)

Croton (*Codiaeum variegatum*)

Hibiscus (*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*)

In GCMG Patricia Martin’s presentation on Succulents (*Gulf Coast Gardening*, July 2023), one of her succulent gardens inspired this author to try small palms in a hanging basket. Also a large basket will be created soon using small plumeria.

The flowers are nature’s jewels with whose wealth she decks her summer beauty.

-George Croly

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Choosing the Perfect Container



Patty McElhany
GCMG 2022

Growing flowers, plants, vegetables and/or fruit trees in containers is a growing trend in America. We are a more mobile society than in past generations. We are also an aging population requiring a different growing environment than in previous years. Many are downsizing into smaller homes with smaller yards or just have balconies and patios.

A perfect container for one person is not the same as for another. Many factors go into determining what is best to be successful. The right container is as important to the success of the plant as the plant is.

Why choose container gardening?

Use when space is limited

Use when soil conditions are poor

Use when you want more control over your growing conditions (better sunlight, more shade)

What depth and size should a container be?

Depth:

Shallower Containers:

Most vegetables need at least 8 to 10-inches of soil; the shallower the container the faster the soil dries out

Deeper Containers:

Crops with long roots or large growing crops such as tomatoes, carrots and peppers need deeper containers

Size:

Large Containers:

Provide a more efficient use of space and serves as a heat reservoir in winter and prevents overheating on warmer days

Smaller Containers:

Easier to move and can be used to start plants or seeds indoors, and then move outdoors when ready or when needing to move plants to protected areas

Challenges in Container Gardening:

Watering the correct amount

Keeping the soil from drying out on hot days

Choosing the correct soil for best drainage

TYPES OF CONTAINERS:

TERRACOTTA/CLAY

Advantages: Readily available for purchase, classic, looks good with most everything, relatively inexpensive and heavier so it doesn't move around in strong winds

Disadvantages: Breaks easily, needs to be brought in when temps drop below freezing, porous, requiring more frequent watering

PLASTIC

Advantages: Cheap, lightweight, widely available, many colors, sizes, and shapes available, long-lasting

Disadvantages: Soil temps increase in full sun, can become brittle and break after exposure to extreme cold or heat

CONCRETE

Advantages: Rugged, doesn't topple easily in high winds, extremely durable and long-lasting, offers a classic look

Disadvantages: Very heavy, difficult to move, limited color choice, expensive

METAL

Advantages: Popular because they can give a modern, contemporary look when using copper, galvanized zinc or cast iron; virtually indestructible

Disadvantages: Soil temps increase in full sun, although some newer metal raised beds have been developed recently with superior heat reflection; fertilizer solutions can interact with some metals causing discoloration; can be expensive

WOOD OR HALF BARRELS

Advantages: Attractive, comes in all sizes, durable, widely available, affordable, roots of plants stay cooler, excellent choice for growing most vegetables as vegetables grown in wooden containers are most often healthier than in pots of same depth, gives off a warm appearance, paintable or sealable, can be left outdoors in all temperatures

Disadvantages: Unless you use a rot-resistant wood you will need to paint or seal the wood to prevent decay. Wooden planter boxes and half barrels are bulky and heavy. They take up a lot of space on balconies and decks, and can weigh up to 250 lbs. or more when filled with potting soil and plants

WIRE FRAME WITH MOSS OR COCONUT COIR LINER

Advantages: Natural look, easy to use, lightweight, relatively inexpensive

“The right container is important...”

Disadvantages: Moisture evaporates quickly, liners must be replaced each year or two

FABRIC

Advantages: Cylindrical pots made of fabric are lightweight and collapsible, making them the perfect container for people on the move. They come in multiple sizes, dissipate heat instead of collecting it and maximize the moist soil volume to reduce the need for watering. Since the pot is porous, a fibrous root structure forms rather than a coiled one and thus, creates a healthier plant root structure.

Disadvantages: Porous nature of fabric requires more watering to keep plants from drying out, they are heavy to move; lifespan is about 2 to 3 years

GLAZED CERAMIC

Advantages: More expensive than its unglazed terracotta counterparts, many choices of colors and patterns, beautiful, perfect accents to patio or landscape, not porous like terracotta so they don't lose moisture as fast

Disadvantages: Heavy, breaks as easily as terracotta, need to move in when freezing temperatures arrive if they are unglazed on the inside. A 5-gallon ceramic pot can weigh 30 pounds without potting mix and plants, and as much as 70 to 80 pounds with wet potting mix and plants

POLYSTYRENE FOAM

Advantages: Lightweight, realistic, sturdy, wide variety of sizes, shapes and finishes, more durable than plastic pots, holds up well in all weather and can be left outdoors year-round. They are lighter than stone, wood or terracotta

Disadvantages: Can be as expensive as its counterparts. Lightweight, so easily moved by high winds

REPURPOSED ITEMS USED AS PLANTERS: Repurposing urban and suburban waste is a wonderful option and adds variety, texture and color to your garden. Old wheelbarrows, wooden wine boxes, old metal wash bins ...almost anything can be used as a container for growing vegetables

CAUTION: Rust is not harmful to the plants, but make sure no toxic substances were stored in the pot and there is no peeling paint. Drill holes if necessary for drainage

Did you know.... square, rectangular, or cylindrical containers need less frequent watering than tapered pots?

vegetables grown in straight-sided containers generally have healthier root systems?

color affects heat and moisture in container vegetable gardens? Generally, lighter colors keep the media more moist and cooler. Darker colors absorb and hold heat, drying out the plants more quickly.

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Flowers in glazed ceramic



Tomato in terracotta



Wash tub with flowers



Flowers in wire

All photos by MG Patty McElhany

Putting the WOW into Container Gardening



Pam Hunter
GCMG 2018

If you want to add some pizzazz to your garden, try container gardening. I call them plant towns, coined by my brother-in-law, Merlin. Add elegance to your garden by planting several different plants in one container. The container can be anything from a milk jug cut in half with holes punched in the bottom, to an elegant pot.

Here in the garden world, we have what's called *thriller*, *filler* and *spiller*. A thriller is usually a tall plant with strong form and color. Fillers are plants that fill bare spaces and hide the soil. Finally, spillers are plants that trail over the container. The options for plant choices are almost unlimited. The plants should be suitable for your intended sun and shade locations. Use at least three types of plants for a lush container that is surely to impress.

A few examples of thrillers:

Purple fountain grass (*Pennisetum setaceum*)

Cordyline (*Cordyline fruticosa*)

Dracaena (*Dracaena fragrans*)

Tropicanna® Canna series; variegated foliage (*Canna indica*)

Snapdragon (*Antirrhinum majus*)

Iris

Options for fillers could be:

Polkadot plant (*Hypoestes phyllostachya*)

Caladium

Juncus (*Juncus effusus*)

Begonia

Coleus (*Plectranthus scutellarioides*)

Abutilon (*Abutilon theophrasti*)

Spillers could consist of:

Variegated English Ivy (*Hedera helix*)

Sweet potato vine (*Ipomoea batatas*)

Nasturtium (*Tropaeolum majus*)

Moss rose (*Portulaca grandiflora*)

Alyssum (*Lobularia maritima*)

Bidens (*Bidens ferulifolia*)

Creeping Jenny (*Lysimachia nummularia*)

Thrillers work best as the tallest plant. Remember, at planting time the thriller goes in the center of a pot so that it can be viewed from all sides, or at the back of a pot that will be displayed in a corner or against a wall. Keep in mind that not all thrillers need to be plants. They could be inanimate objects like a piece of driftwood, a stone or a fountain.

Next come the fillers. Fillers are mid-size, mounding plants and fill in the space in the planter. Fillers add mass to the overall composition and can add textural contrast or colorful counterpoints. Fillers can also help by hiding the bare, lower stems of the thriller. Fillers should complement and not clash with the thriller.

The third component are spiller plants which do just what the name implies; adding lushness to the arrangement, they *spill* or *sprawl* over the side of the pot's edge. Spillers are usually smaller plants that are placed in front of the fillers. These too should have a contrasting or complementary color and texture to the arrangement without dominating or clashing.

No matter what size the arrangement may be, ensure that



Eddie Smith Ph.D. Mississippi State Extension



Eddie Smith Ph.D. Mississippi State Extension

“...thrillers, fillers, spillers, and pizzazz!”

the coordinating plants have similar needs — such as the amount of sun or shade and water required. Scale is also important. Be sure the pot is large enough to give each plant adequate space to grow. One plant should not be so large that it overpowers the others. Too much color can also be a problem. This can be resolved by using an evergreen in one of the positions, such as a beautifully shaped conifer as the thriller, fern as filler, and ivy as the spiller.

In plant placement, choose the size of a container to accommodate the desired arrangement. Check the spacing instructions on the plant label and divide that by two. For instance, if the label on a Vinca plant reads that there should be 8 to 12-inches between plants, only factor 4 to 6-inches for the container.

Go ahead...grow your own plant town with thrillers, fillers, spillers, and pizzazz!

References:

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MG Stacey Phillips



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