

Massachusetts Master Gardener Association

FACT SHEET



Have Gardening Questions? The **Master Gardener Help Line Hours** are 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. on Fridays (all year) as well as Wednesdays (March-November) and Mondays (April-October).

Phone: 617-933-4929 Email: mghepline@masshort.org.

Container Basics

City, country and suburban gardeners all look to containers to bring summer onto patios, balconies, doorways and rooftops or to fill bare spots in their gardens. Wherever they are used and whatever you grow in them, following a few rules will make your container gardens more successful.

Let's start with the containers. They can be terra cotta, glazed pottery, metal, stone, plastic or wood – almost anything that will hold soil. When choosing a container remember it will be much heavier and harder to move after you add soil and plants. Lightweight foam and plastic are easy to handle but may topple during summer storms, undoing your efforts. Terra cotta planters dry out faster, cement are very heavy and ceramic may break. You should choose the type that best meets your needs.

The second requirement for a container is good drainage. If there are no holes or only very small holes in the pot you must get out a drill and add more. Without sufficient drainage your plants will die from root rot. Putting stones or charcoal in a pot is not a substitute for drain holes. A piece of burlap, paper or mesh over the drain holes can keep soil in and decks cleaner.

When you are pull containers out of storage, make certain they have been cleaned of all dirt and debris before you begin planting. Wash them thoroughly and then rinse with a 10% bleach solution. This will kill any diseases that may have lingered from last year. Use fresh potting mix. Garden soil is great in the garden, but it compacts inside a pot, inhibiting root growth and nutrient absorption. Further, you may bring diseases or unwanted hitchhikers into your pot with the soil. There are numerous recipes for potting mixes online if you would like to make your own. Commercial mixes are also an excellent choice. Just be certain to buy potting mix, and nothing with the word 'soil' on the bag.

Check that your container is the right size for what you want to plant. Geraniums will be happy in an 8" deep pot, but if

you want to grow tomatoes on your balcony, you must have 12" for the roots to stretch into. In a mixed pot, choose a depth appropriate for the deepest or largest plant. And don't forget plants get wider as well as taller. A very small pot may hold a large plant, but look silly doing so.

Decide ahead of time where your container will be located, full sun, part sun or shade. The tag on the plant should tell you if it needs full sun, shade or something in between. This is going to affect where you can place your container. It also affects what plants will grow together happily. Nearly all vegetables require full sun, but there are many flowers that will happily grow in partial shade. Remember meeting the plants needs are vital for successful containers.

It is easy to fall in love at the nursery. But if you keep a color scheme in mind, it'll be easier to put together spectacular containers. Remember white geraniums and white alyssum will disappear by a white house, magenta zinnias in front of a brick wall will be a problem too. Consider bringing together a variety of leaf types, flower structures, heights and habits (mounding or trailing) to make a more interesting container. Mixing annuals (like geraniums), perennials (like hostas), vegetables, herbs and even small shrubs may make your most exciting containers yet.

Keep containers watered to suit the demands of the plants in them. Do they want to stay constantly moist, or would they prefer to dry out between watering? Water retention crystals may help your plants survive very hot days or brief absences, but don't replace regular deep waterings. When plants wilt due to a lack of water, they are under stress. Their ability to flower, or even survive, is compromised. Fertilize regularly to keep the plants in peak bloom, but if you plan to keep perennials or shrubs for another year, stop all fertilizing at the end of August. Take shrubs and perennials out of the container in fall and plant in the garden to overwinter them for use next spring.

The Massachusetts Master Gardener Association is a non-profit organization whose mission is to share knowledge and experience with the public through outreach programs in education, horticulture and gardening; to provide the Master Gardener Training Program to interested members of the public; and to provide graduates of the Master Gardener Training Program with educational and practical opportunities to extend their knowledge and interests in gardening and related topics. <http://www.massmastergardeners.org/>