

Container Growing

Growing Woody Plants in Containers

Many people these days would like to grow shrubs and even trees in containers on their decks and patios. But plants in containers need some extra care and attention to perform well.

Choosing your container:

Make sure the container is large enough for a mature plant. Our nursery staff can help with this. The container should be frost proof; some ceramic containers will crack if exposed to freezing and thawing. There are attractive plastic and fiberglass containers on the market today, and another good option is wood. Cedar boxes and oak barrels make excellent patio planters.

Potting:

It is best to use potting soil rather than garden soil in the container. It does not compact as readily and provides more even moisture retention. You should plan on repotting your plants every 2-3 years during their dormant period (late winter or early spring), replacing the potting soil with new potting soil. If you are putting the plant back into the same container, you should root prune at repotting to keep the root system dense.

Water:

Plants in containers prefer even moisture. This means checking the soil often and watering frequently. When you hand water, water in small amounts several times to make sure the soil is thoroughly moistened. We recommend investing in a patio drip system on a timer if you are not a reliable waterer.

Fertilizer

The easiest way to fertilize container plants is to use a slow release fertilizer such as Osmocote. Or you can use a liquid balanced fertilizer, such as MiracleGro, at the suggested rate, March through August. There are also organic fertilizers, both granular and liquid, formulated for container use. Organic fertilizers intended for in-ground use are not suitable; they require soil microbes to fully break down, and often end up leaching out of the container rather than being taken up by the plant. It is better to underfertilize rather than overfertilize.

Soil Temperature:

In a container, soil temperatures fluctuate much more than in the ground. In the summer, protect the pot from direct sun to keep the soil cool. The soil also gets much colder during winter cold spells. Many plants that are hardy planted in the ground can suffer winter damage in a pot because their roots get too cold. To prevent this kind of damage, you can move your plant into an unheated building for the winter, or move it close to your house. If it is too big to move, you can wrap the pot



*Dwarf Cypress in Barrel,
underplanting of thyme and sedums*

with insulation. Another method is to line the pot with closed-cell foam insulation before planting. Some people place straw bales around their pots for winter protection.

Good Plants for Containers

- **Conifers:** Some of the best plants for containers are conifers. Many conifers are both extremely hardy and drought tolerant. Many pines (*Pinus sp.*) are hardy enough that their containers do not need winter protection. Other conifers that work well are true cedars (*Cedrus*), yews (*Taxus*), and junipers (*Juniperus*). Most of these conifers take well to pruning, and can be trained as large, artistic bonsai plants.
- **Japanese Maples:** Japanese maples (*Acer palmatum*, *Acer japonicum*, *Acer shirasawanum*) and their cousin, *Acer circinatum*, Vine maple, are beautiful as container plants for decks. Be sure to choose a cultivar that is suitable for your light situation; all can take shade, but only a limited number can take full sun. Slow growing and dwarf cultivars are particularly suited to container culture. The maples are very sensitive to drought, so be careful with your summer watering. They also prefer cool soil in summer, so choose a light colored container, or make sure the container is shaded. Fertilize sparingly. Winter protect your maples.
- **Fruit Plants** Fruit plants for containers include mini-dwarf apples, dwarf pears, dwarf cherries, blueberries, and figs (figs require winter protection). Be sure to check pollination requirements for good fruit set! Other great food plants for containers include citrus and olives- winter the containers inside a cool space and enjoy outside in the summer.
- **Herbs** Some perennial herbs including mints and French Tarragon will spread extensively if planted in the ground. Planting them in pots allows you to contain their roots. They will need summer water. Like woody plants, they will need to have their potting soil renewed every 2-3 years. This can be accomplished by unpotting in the fall or spring, dividing the clump, and potting into new soil. A second method is to top dress the container annually in the dormant season with a few inches of new potting soil and compost.
- **Other Plants:** Almost any plant can be grown in a container if you follow the rules above. For containers that stay outside, a good rule of thumb on hardiness is this: a plant in an unprotected container is about 2-3 zones less hardy than in the ground. If you have a plant ground-hardy to zone 6 in a container, its actual hardiness will be zone 8 or 9. This refers to extended cold periods of many days or even weeks; short duration cold snaps - 1 or 2 days- are usually weathered well by most container plants.



Dwarf Japanese Maple in Container