

Garden Column

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## Down Sizing to Container Gardens

“I seek and don’t find myself. I belong to chrysanthemum hours, neatly lined up in flowerpots.” Fernando Pessoa, Portugese poet and writer.

We have downsized. A year ago, we moved from an acre lot with numerous gardens to an association of houses with common grounds. Our new home has only a thin strip of land surrounding it, about 4 feet wide, in which to grow plants. However, while we left our gardens we did not leave our desire to garden. The first year was dedicated to sorting out the nuances of our new home. This year we are tackling garden-related issues and have discovered container gardens or “gardening in a small space”.

The popularity of container gardening can be seen as containers adorn apartment balconies, bungalow porches, high rise rooftops, and city and town streets. Container gardening allows creation of special gardens, but there are considerations. Containers and pots dry out faster than garden soil so they must be watered frequently. There must be drainage holes in the bottom to prevent wet soil and disease, and plants should be regularly fertilized.

However, individual plants take on an entirely new look in containers, highlighting their unique color, texture and form. A combination of planters using a variety of plant material achieves a bouquet-like appearance that provides color throughout the growing season. And during incimate weather, containers can be moved inside.

The choice of a container is largely up to the individual. Plants are the real focus, the container is just the vessel. Anything that holds soil and has drainage holes in the bottom may be transformed into a container garden. The common image of a container is usually that of a wooden box. A friend, who also has recently down sized, has built wooden planters out of treated wood. One planter is 24” x 20”, about the same as six linear feet in a normal garden setting, and sown to Simpson lettuce that he has been harvesting for several weeks. Other planters contain beets and onions. All are about 24 inches high so they can be tended standing up. A concession to “mature” backs.

We have planted both flowers, and herbs in large terra cotta pots. The pots are about 15 inches in diameter and 17 to 18 inches deep, enough to hold a lot of soil. The drawback is these pots become very heavy when filled; so, moving them has to be either a cooperative venture or done very carefully when alone.

There are other items that can be used as containers. Galvanized pails, "leaky" watering cans, and even discarded boots are good choices. Farms and antique shops are a treasure trove of possible containers such as feed troughs, cream pails,

and assorted cans. Copper tubs and pails make great containers but tend to be expensive unless it's an heirloom looking for a functional use.

We had an old wheel barrow that rusted out years ago thereby providing natural drainage holes. It was filled with soil and for several seasons contained colorful coleus plants. Two huge plastic pots, painted an "earthy brown" and planted with geraniums, sat on our front deck as a bright welcome to visitors.

In Europe, container gardening is an art form. During a trip to Germany, we observed window boxes and decorative pots filled with flowers, particularly geraniums, and vegetables and herbs, even on the most modest of properties.

Annuals are logical flowers to put in containers. If dissatisfied this year, you can start all over next year with a new flower grouping. Anything that can be grown in the ground can be grown in a container. However, containers may have to be watered daily during warm weather and a balanced fertilizer such as 10-10-10 added periodically, regardless of pot size.

A few suggested container flowers are as follows: *Lysmachia* has trailing limbs, 24 to 36 inches long, that cascade over the rims of containers. The dime-sized leaves are greenish gold and turn bright yellow in sun. However, it will grow nicely in either sun or shade. It's also attractive to bees, butterflies, and birds.

Begonias are tough, low maintenance plants that do well in a variety of conditions. However, their best growth is under semi shade in rich, and moist but well-drained soil. Begonias should be frequently fertilized.

*Alyssum* has dainty, fragrant flowers that spill over the container edges to create a soft "frothy" look. *Alyssum* will bloom all summer and likes a sunny to partially sunny spot. The flower colors vary from blue, pink, to white and plants vary in height from 6 inches to 3 feet. Once *alyssum* is established in a pot, it needs very little maintenance.

*Licorice* plant has elegant silvery to light green foliage and is low maintenance. Plants prefer full sun and are a great companion to other container plants. It grows 1 to 3 feet high and will spread to 2 feet under optimum conditions. It is deer resistant and drought tolerant.

*Coleus* leaves have striking color combinations of red, orange, yellow, green, pink, purple, and white but flowers are diminutive. The amount of sun will influence the foliage color. Most varieties prefer shady areas but some newer varieties tolerate sunny areas. Plants require a moist but well drained soil. To get a fuller and more compact plant, initially pinch back the growing points.

*Impatiens* has flowers that range from red, pink, orange, yellow, purple, to white. It's a perfect container flower for shady spots but if plants are too close together they become "spindly". Use a sterile soil or a soil-less mixture to promote good drainage and mix in a slow-release fertilizer before transplanting. If plants dry out, they will lose their leaves so water regularly but don't over water as plants become susceptible to downy mildew.

Geraniums, particularly the red varieties are striking in a container. Plants need to be pinched back to promote a fuller plant, and later, spent leaves need to be dead-headed. Plants tolerate heat and dry soil but don't let soil dry out too long as plants lose their color and flower production slows down.

Lastly, "One cannot quite believe the potted plants," thought the butterfly. "They associate too much with people." Hans Christian Anderson