

## GARDEN PRACTICE

# Container conduct

Left unattended, plants in pots can suffer. **Andi Clevely** guides us through the important steps to follow to ensure healthy plants and a rewarding display.

Photography by Tim Sandall

**CONTAINER GARDENING** is versatile and deservedly popular. It enables you to have plants where otherwise none might grow, stage-manage a display that evolves with the seasons, and even succeed with subjects that might resent your garden's soil or aspect.

It is not necessarily a low-maintenance option, however. The reservoir of water and nutrients available to roots is limited by the capacity of the container, which is also subject to greater variations in temperature and exposure than open ground, where roots are often buffered against trouble. To keep container plants happy requires a certain amount of ongoing commitment.

## Duty of care

Confining a plant in the artificial environment of a container limits its ability to fend for itself. Available resources of water and food are finite, so it will depend on you for regular attention and sustenance more than when growing in the open ground.

The range of different growing media now available is just one instance of the positive benefits of container culture: greater control may mean more responsibility but it also enhances choice. No garden soil is perfect for every type of plant, whereas growing in pots allows you to tailor compost to the plant. Neither will the only free garden site necessarily suit a plant all year round, whereas containers are movable: a patio peach could be flowered in frost-free shelter but fruited in full sun.

Outdoor container plants are generally less demanding than house plants, however, and there are many ways to reduce the care they need. Siting a plant in its preferred position – full sun or cool shade, for example – can cut the amount of watering or emergency protection it needs, while mixing partners with similar needs can result in low-maintenance ensembles.

Routine inspection, daily in summer but less often at other times, will often pre-empt trouble and reduce the need to rescue an ailing plant: do not wait until foliage begins to suffer – light pots and shrunken compost signal an urgent need for water. Additionally, choosing and regularly refreshing the most appropriate compost – soil-based for permanent plantings, soil-less for seasonal containers, ericaceous for acid-loving subjects – can help avoid many unnecessary problems. ►391

## DROUGHT-RESISTANT CONTAINERS

As watering is a major component of pot care, creating a large drought-tolerant container can economise on time and effort. Choose an appropriate material – clay, wood, stone and concrete keep roots cooler than metal or plastic – and use a soil-based compost. Add water-saving gel (see p390) if required to delay drying. As insurance against a wet season, though, spread a generous layer of drainage material in the bottom of the pot.

Select drought-tolerant plants that match your aim: permanent plants such as aloes, olives or lavender might mix with seasonal bedding such as mesembryanthemum, helichrysum or lantana. You can even include plunged house plants such as *Clivia* (in shade), dwarf pomegranate and most cacti and succulents, which all benefit from spending summer outdoors. Top the completed container with an aggregate mulch to keep roots cool and delay evaporation.

The container with *Agave* and trailing *Delosperma* (below), planted for summer 2008, received no artificial watering during the whole season. Overwintering under glass allowed it to thrive for a second summer.



Growing plants in pots enables flexible displays and extends what you can grow in your garden





## MAINTAINING CONTAINER DISPLAYS



### How to water

In hot or windy weather check pots daily; push a finger below the surface to see if compost is moist. Even in wet weather check containers with dense foliage, under trees or by walls.

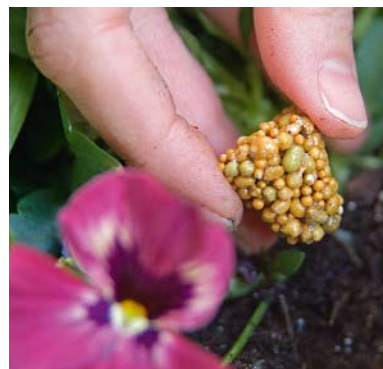
Water in the morning to set plants up for the day; for control, use a can or a gently trickling hosepipe aimed at the roots rather than foliage.

Continue until water drains from the base; bubbles indicate dry compost that needs rewetting by standing the pot in a tray of water for an hour.



### Managing water

Reduce water requirements of plants by covering basal drainage material with a layer of garden compost, incorporating more into the potting mix, up to 25 percent by volume. Adding water-saving gel (available as crystals from garden centres) at potting time (above) also aids water retention. Topdress permanent plantings in spring with fresh garden or potting compost, and finish with an organic or aggregate mulch to limit evaporation. Remember that too much water is as harmful as too little.



### Feeding container plants

Feed from mid-spring until mid-autumn, depending on locality. Most compost contains nutrients for about six weeks' growth, but soil-based mixes can sustain growth longer; some composts include slow-release food for extended supply. Fertilisers may be organic or inorganic, and are usually in liquid, granular or tablet form (above). Once compost is exhausted, feed fortnightly (veg and hungry plants weekly) with a general-purpose formulation, or use specialist feed for plants such as rhododendrons.



### Care over winter

Take precautions with half-hardy plants and all but the largest containers to prevent frost injury. Tender subjects should be moved to a frost-free place in autumn, while others are best placed in a sheltered position such as the lee of a wall, ideally gathering them together for easy protection. Enclose pots with straw or layers of sacking, bubble plastic or matting; shield foliage with fleece, stems with foam pipe insulation. Keep plants on the dry side until spring.



### PLANT LIFELINE

Automatic drip irrigation (above) may sound like a complex and expensive luxury, but reasonably priced and easily-assembled systems are widely available, and will allow your plants to receive water while you are on holiday

### Potted opportunities

The huge variety of containers and range of composts available means that almost any kind of plant can be grown successfully out of garden soil, often permanently or at least for several years if required. As well as more familiar purposes, such as hanging baskets and window-boxes of summer bedding, or pots of tender citrus and pelargoniums, containers are ideal for specialist uses, such as providing exacting alpinists or bonsai with perfect habitats, and for growing most food plants, whether fruit, herbs or vegetables.

Keeping this great assortment of plants happy depends on satisfying a few simple criteria. All any plant needs is a suitably sized container, the compost it likes and a site that meets its requirements. Adequate watering and feeding are the chief elements of its basic maintenance routine and, if done well, should ensure it will thrive. Periodically, the rooting environment will need some attention: potting on for developing plants when they outgrow their containers, and repotting or topdressing for more permanent plants, even if they do not need more rooting space. Winter protection will almost certainly be needed because the pot and rootball are exposed on all sides, and freezing can be lethal.

Looking after the welfare of plants in containers need be neither arduous nor difficult, however. On the contrary, most gardeners find that catering for their needs is ultimately rewarding and totally compulsive. ■

*Andi Clevely*, gardener and author, tends a precipitous mid-Wales plot where a large collection of containers supplies the only level growing area

**@ Further information:** There is a wealth of advice on growing plants in containers on RHS Online:  
 ● For vegetables go to: [www.rhs.org.uk/growyourown/advice\\_containers2.asp](http://www.rhs.org.uk/growyourown/advice_containers2.asp)  
 ● Summer pots: [www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profiles0505/summercontainers.asp](http://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profiles0505/summercontainers.asp)



### Holiday measures

Timed irrigation devices can be used if you are away, although all but the most sophisticated systems deliver water whether plants need it or not. If you are away for a few days, especially in summer, gather pots in a shady place, ideally out of the wind. Water well before you go, and arrange for someone to continue in your absence. Alternatively assemble plants on moist capillary matting, or even fill buckets with water and use wicks of damp rope to duct water to individual pots.



### Container choreography

An advantage of growing plants in pots is that all but the largest can be moved, either for their own welfare or to maintain an attractive display. Some plants need sun, others shade or shelter, and these should be moved to an ideal spot as the season progresses; frost-tender plants and those in small containers can spend winter under cover (above). Move light- and heat-sensitive plants to cooler shade in midsummer. Avoid moving heavy pots, or manoeuvre them with a wheeled base or low trolley.



### Topdressing and repotting

Before warning signs appear (such as top-heavy growth, solid compost that does not absorb water readily or roots emerging from drainage holes), refresh the rooting environment by repotting or topdressing plants – best done in spring before growth starts. Pot on developing plants to slightly larger containers. Mature plants can stay in the same pot: scrape away loose compost and outer roots, reducing the rootball by a quarter; alternatively remove and replace the top 5cm (2in) of old compost.



### Grouping and staging

Combining potted plants allows you to orchestrate a compelling display that changes with the seasons or as particular plants peak, and also helps you manage them efficiently, especially those in small pots. Plants with similar needs are easier to tend collectively – they share a liking for the chosen aspect and exposure, for example, and are quickly watered en masse. Pots dry out slowly in groups, so ensure good drainage by raising them off the ground on 'pot feet' or gravel.