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Tips for growing in a container

By SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS
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Deborah Thomas from Sonoma Mission Gardens demonstrates container gardening at an event.
Jeremy Portje/Press Democrat 2016

Question: I want to garden at home, but I have limited space. Can I grow a thriving container garden here in Sonoma County?

Answer: Absolutely! Container gardening is not only a space-saver, it's also a flexible, creative and rewarding way to grow everything from herbs and veggies to native flowers. Whether you're working with a sunny patio in Santa Rosa or a shady balcony in Jenner, you just need to choose the right plants, set your containers up for success and have a thoughtful maintenance plan.

Match plants to site

Sonoma County spans a wide range of microclimates, from foggy coastal zones to hot, dry areas inland. This variability means your plant choices should reflect where you live.

As we often say in the Master Gardener program, it all starts with putting the right plant in the right place. If you're growing edible crops, make sure to place your container in the sunniest spot you can. Otherwise, research your plant's needs and be sure it is planted in a container with appropriate sun exposure.

Understanding your site's balance of sun and shade as well as its average temperatures and wind exposure is essential to growing successful plants. Here are some tips:

- If you're growing in a relatively chilly or shady space, try cool-season crops and shade-tolerant plants like leafy greens, root veggies and violas.
- Take advantage of warmer inland temperatures to grow tomatoes, peppers and drought-tolerant native flowers like California poppies.
- Many herbs tend to grow well in containers despite micro-climate differences; spice up your garden and your cooking with these resilient crops.

Choose right containers

When it comes to container gardens, drainage is your number one consideration. Without proper drainage (or if you overwater), your plants can develop root rot. Be sure that your containers, whether they are pots, buckets, barrels or bathtubs, have multiple well-spaced drainage holes.

Also, avoid placing your containers directly on the ground. Instead, elevate them on risers or bricks to allow surplus water to escape.

Gardeners have been finding ways to make their own planters since before upcycling was popular. Consider the material of your container as it relates to your watering plan:

- Ceramic pots are breathable but can dry out fast. Look for unglazed pots for better drainage.
- Plastic pots retain moisture and are lightweight. Dark colors can help soil retain heat.
- Wooden containers such as half wine barrels, are great for larger plants and for their natural ability to biodegrade, but they'll need to be replaced every so often.

Potting mix, not soil

Don't be tempted to fill your containers with soil, especially not the heavy clay soil found much many parts of Sonoma County, which can choke container crop roots. Instead, use commercial potting mix, which is designed to be well-draining and nutrient-rich. You can also mix in compost for added nutrients during planting and every few months to recharge the soil.

Be careful to refresh your container's soil annually, aerating it to prevent compaction, adding nutrients in the form of compost or a balanced organic fertilizer and topping up the potting mix.

Manage moisture

Container plants dry out more quickly than inground plants, especially during hot summer months. Check moisture levels daily during peak heat by sticking your finger about an inch into the soil. If it feels dry, it's time to water.

Early morning is the best time to water and give your plants the moisture they need before the heat of the day. A drip irrigation system or self-watering container can be a game-changer, especially if you're gardening in multiple pots.

Remember: Overwatering is the most common danger to container plants. Ensure adequate drainage and monitor soil moisture to prevent root rot.

Educational workshop

The UC Master Gardeners of Sonoma County are on a mission to ensure that everyone can enjoy gardening, no matter how much space they have at home. A free workshop, "Small Space Gardening in Containers," will be offered from 2-3:30 p.m. Saturday, May 31, at the Petaluma Regional Mini Library, 150 Fairgrounds Drive, Petaluma. Advance registration is requested: tinyurl.com/bdsp2e4x or sonomamg.ucanr.edu/.

More resources:

The Real Dirt on Container Gardening: tinyurl.com/yck2xhjv

Container Garden Pests: tinyurl.com/4kjrcjvm

Water-Saving Techniques in Container Gardening: tinyurl.com/2x44uax8

UC Master Gardeners Information Desk: tinyurl.com/2ztweyk7

Contributors to this week's column were Allison Eckert, Diane Judd and Joy Lanzendorfer. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County sonomamg.ucanr.edu/ provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mqsonoma@ucanr.edu.