

Container Gardening

MARILYN H. JOHNSON

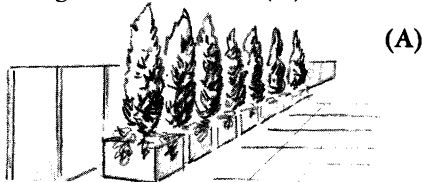


CONTAINER gardening, an ancient practice, is coming more and more into favor these days. It now can be seen in various forms and locations and may consist of a variety of materials, plants, and mulches. The age-old problems of esthetics and culture still exist, with age-old solutions as well as contemporary ones.

Plant containers today are used for a variety of purposes. They can direct the pedestrian traffic, provide visual barriers and windbreaks, contribute color, texture, and shade, and even furnish a transition between the interior and the exterior.

Plant containers, if below eye level, are a helpful and subtle method of controlling pedestrian traffic patterns. The pedestrian might become instantly aware that a container garden is contributing color, but if the elements of color and texture are skillfully handled, his attention will usually be captured, and he will be unaware that he is being guided.

Sometimes—especially in these days of the terrace, the patio, and the roof garden—visual barriers are required for privacy, to obstruct a view, or as a windbreak. Container gardening is one way of controlling these problems. A row of tall-growing material of the columnar type, planted in a long planter or in identical individual tubs, is one way to acquire a strong and unified effect (A).



Another solution is the vertical garden which, however, takes time, patience, and many plants. It is portable, attractive, and worth the extra effort. A wooden frame first is covered with chicken wire. Then this is packed with well separated and dampened peat moss or sphagnum to receive annual plants with small root balls covered with soil. These should be placed almost vertically in the peat moss. If plants are applied to both sides, a freestanding wall is achieved. If one side is to be set against the building wall, tar paper or other water-resistant material should be placed between the garden and the building. This will keep the moisture in the garden and out of the building.

There should be a regular watering schedule, and the garden should be dampened thoroughly. There must also be a regular liquid fertilizing schedule, since the plants require nourishment in order to perform well.

I have found the container is a very effective transition between interior and exterior. By repeating, with an indoor planter, some of the plant material which I have used outdoors, a bond is created between the two.

Container gardens are flexible and versatile and can be used in a variety of locations, such as entrances and exits of buildings, as freestanding tubs on streets and terraces, as elements in exciting roof



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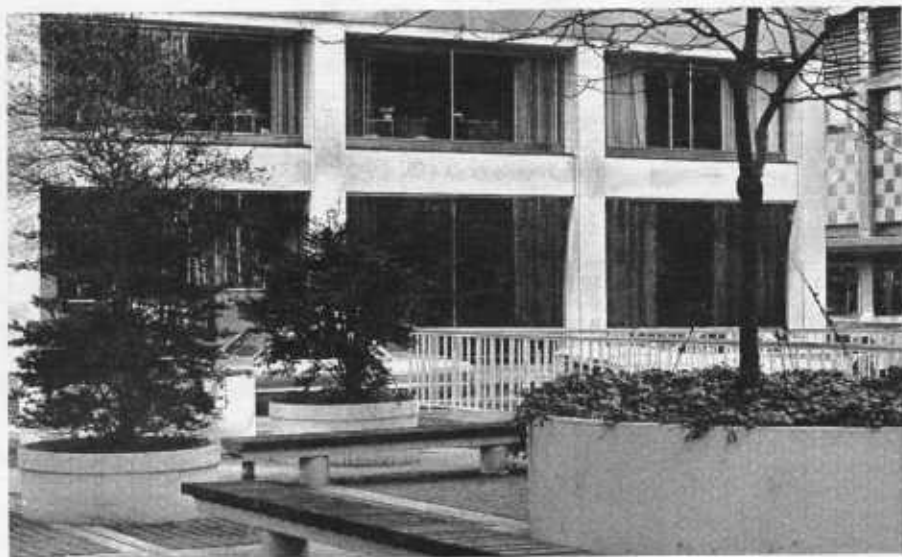


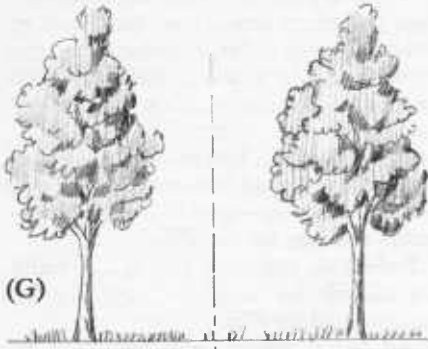
gardens, as vertical garden walls, and as window boxes. They can be used in groups to enliven interiors, and they can be used as single features, such as bonsai (B), inside and outside.

Container gardens, found in a variety of forms and locations, fulfill many purposes. Some can be portable, such as boxes, tubs, pots, and hanging baskets. Some can be made even more mobile with the addition of concealed casters. In fixed open (E)

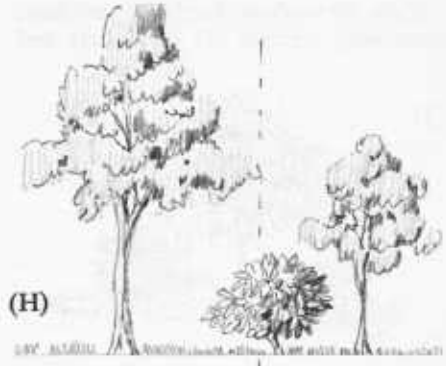
areas in the paving (C) and in fixed raised areas (D), the container gardens will, of course, be stationary.

More and more contemporary buildings seem to be surrounded with expanses of concrete which, in the summer, produce a tremendous amount of reflection. Ways to combat this problem include use of free-standing containers (E and F), opening of planting areas in the concrete, or raised planting areas—all to accommodate trees, shrubs, or bedding plants.





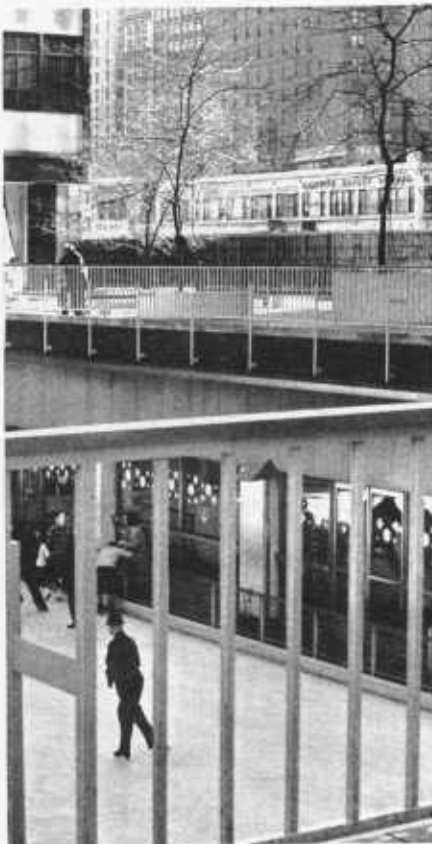
(G)



(H)

Perhaps the one element that makes the greatest contribution to any garden regardless of size is the careful thought (or design) devoted to it. Some of the components of design are balance, scale, color, texture, dimensions, and harmony.

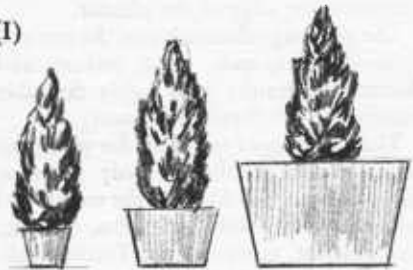
(F)



Since the same design principles apply, equally, to the small or portable garden as to the larger, stationary one, the plan is of a primary importance. Within the plan, consider balance first. For a successful planting, it plays an important, but unobtrusive part. Formal balance (G), most frequently used, is probably easier and more suitable than informal balance (H).

One element which seems difficult for the layman to understand is scale. The plants, the container, and the surroundings should be the proper size in relationship to each other (I). An ingredient too small in scale is insignificant, and one too large is overpowering. Center is just right.

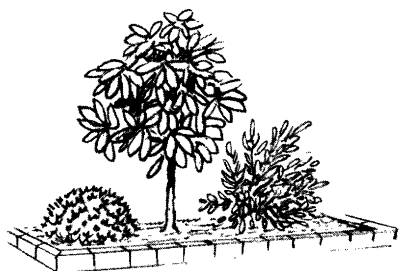
(I)



Color can be used as a dramatic contrast to a building if tones of a contrasting color are selected. Complementary colors can be used to accent your building. If a pleasing combination is used, it can do much to make a planting attractive. Since too many colors weaken the effect, fewer colors should strengthen it. I recommend using no more than three complementary colors and one contrasting color in any container composition.

Even the smallest planting should have contrasting textures (J) for variety and

(J)



interest. I would suggest two for a small garden container and more for a larger planting. As with color, however, do not introduce too many textures, since this tends to weaken rather than to strengthen the composition.

There should be a variety of heights as well as textures and colors in a planter. If the planter is to be seen primarily from the front, I suggest using three heights with the tallest in the back, the intermediate one in the middle, and the low or trailing type in the front so as to achieve a softening effect.

If the container is free standing and can be seen from all sides, I would place the tallest plants in the center, the intermediates around them, and the low or trailing ones near the edge of the planter.

The pleasing relationship of the integral parts—balance, scale, color, texture, and dimension—results in a highly desirable situation which is called harmony.

The choosing of materials for your container garden is limited only by your imagination. In addition to the traditional materials like wood, terra cotta, ceramic, and concrete, others—rope, Transite tubing, plastics, and aggregates—can be both very serviceable and attractive.

But one important question should be asked before building or buying containers. What is your container supposed to achieve? After you have decided its purpose, you can select your materials. But first, study them and be sure they are a suitable choice. Perhaps the materials have to blend with a certain type of architecture. If so, the proper choice will result in a charming composition.

Wood is preferable to metal because it does not retain heat. Good containers of redwood, pine, cedar, outdoor or marine plywood can be made or bought. If you are building your own, allow for drainage and moisture absorption. Use brass bands or brass screws as fasteners to avoid rust. Most woods should have either paint or a preservative coat—nontoxic to plants—inside and out, for durability.

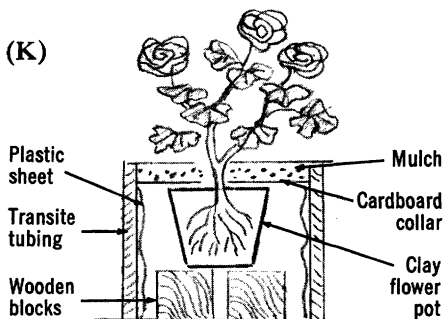
Redwood, rustic in feeling, is really not suitable for urbanized areas or for sophisticated settings.

Attractive garden containers can be made by facing plywood with solid color plastic material—the kind which is used on kitchen counters.

A concrete container, if not massive or heavy in appearance, can have its personality established by the plants that it holds.

Transite tubing, cut and painted, makes an attractive container (K). So do painted

(K)



chimney flue tiles. Both can be obtained from your local terra cotta tile dealer. Use different heights and diameters for the pleasing compositions that will result.

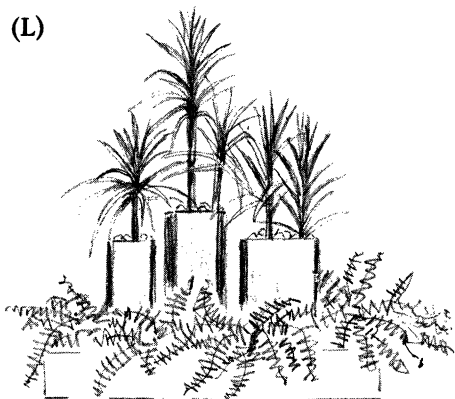
A mulch helps considerably whether indoors or out and gives a garden a finished appearance. Many mulches contribute organic matter to the planting and most help to retain moisture and protect the plant roots from heat. Since mulches come in a large variety, you must choose for your own particular purpose.

Wood chips are rustic, good for large areas, and coarse in texture. They are suitable for rustic architecture or for an outdoor rural setting.

Peat moss and tanbark are both good, and both are dark in color. Peat moss possesses the finer texture of the two. Its texture and richness of color make it suitable for more delicate architecture and for urban settings, but it also may be used for rustic settings.

River washed stones, or slag, make attractive mulches although they do not contribute organically to the planting. These, I would say, also are more suitable for the refined, sophisticated setting (L).

(L)



The choice of plant materials can do much to establish the success of the container garden. It can be made to look delicate, substantial, heavy, gaudy, gay, colorfully pretty, severe, plain, uncluttered, sophisticated, or whatever is desired. I have found (especially with indoor planters) that it is wise to have extra plant material to rotate and freshen the appearance of the container.

There are so many bedding plants which will not only live, but thrive in container gardens that there are almost no limits to the choice. The garden can be planted year after year with almost no repetition of plants. A good book, or garden center, will usually provide the needed information, both for interior and exterior plants. Those interested in bonsai will require special books and information about this subject.

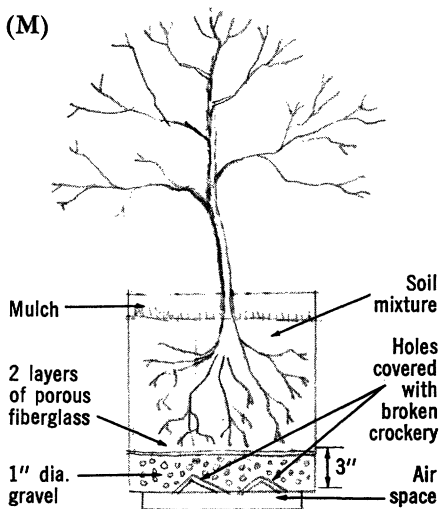
No matter how much attention you pay to the esthetic elements and the plant material, your container garden will not flourish unless you consider the culture of

the plants. They, like all other living things, have many requirements. Every plant must have light, food, and water to thrive. A good soil mixture and spraying program and good drainage contribute greatly toward healthy plants.

A regular fertilizing program will do much to make planting succeed. I would recommend, in addition to fertilizer in the original soil mixture, that a liquid fertilizer be applied at regular intervals. Since requirements vary according to the soil mixture, geographical location, and type of plants, it would be wise to consult your local garden center. Here, too, a spraying program and precise proportions for soil mixtures can be obtained.

The two most common complaints of portable container gardens, too much or too little water, can be solved in many ways. The container should be slightly raised above the ground to provide air-space. There should also be drainage holes in the bottom of the container, and they should be covered with large pieces of broken crockery. In the window box, a 1-inch layer of broken crockery should then be placed over the entire bottom surface. In a larger container, the entire bottom surface should be covered with gravel 1 inch in diameter to a depth of about 3 inches (M). For all types of containers, I place a double thickness of porous fiber glass over the material. This

(M)



helps to keep soil from washing out and discoloring the surrounding sill or terrace. Raised beds have a built-in drainage system, of course.

The best soil mixture, usually a light one, is placed directly on top of the fiber glass. Although the components will be determined by the plants you intend to use, almost all mixtures contain some combination of loam, sand, peat moss or leaf mold, bonemeal, and well-rotted manure or dried cow manure.

Culture for plants in container gardens is the same as for plants growing under more normal conditions—with added problems. Most vigorously growing bedding plants benefit from cutting or pinching back and from the removal of dead

flowers or seed pods which will extend the bloom of many plants. Since they react quickly to heat, wind, and reflection, the trees and shrubs must obtain proper moisture. Watering should be stopped in freezing weather, but can be resumed on the mild winter days.

Although container gardening has been practiced since the time of the ancient Egyptians and has flourished over much of the world, those of us in the cooler climates of this country are still in the pioneering stage. With the trend toward modern architecture and the growing popularity of beautification, the interdependence of building and landscape effects is giving us more and more experience with container gardening.



For more information:

- *Consumers All*, the 1965 Yearbook of Agriculture. "Basic Points of Landscaping," pp. 279-282, Marilyn H. Johnson.

- Agricultural county extension agent and department of horticulture at your State university.

- Various horticultural handbooks of plants and gardens, Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11225.

- Various Sunset Gardening books by Lane Books, Menlo Park, Calif.

- Bonsai information from Bonsai Society, c/o New York Botanical Garden, New York, N.Y. 10458.

Suggested trees for containers: Cornelian-cherry (*Cornus mas*), Washington Hawthorn (*Crataegus phaenopyrum*), honeylocust (*Gleditsia triacanthos* varieties), crabapples (*Malus* species and varieties), sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*), and Japanese pagodatree (*Sophora japonica*).

Suggested shrubs for planters: Glossy Abelia (*Abelia grandiflora*), camellias, Japanese holly (*Ilex crenata* varieties), crapemyrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*), drooping Leucothoe (*Leucothoe catesbaei*), Oregon hollygrape (*Mahonia aquifolium*), Japanese Pieris (*Pieris japonica*), Japanese Pittosporum (*Pittosporum tobira*), Portugal-laurel (*Prunus lusitanica*), azaleas, and rhododendrons.

Suggested annuals for containers: Floss flower (*Ageratum* (dwarf)), sweet alyssum, asparagus fern (trailing) (*Asparagus sprengeri*), ornamental basil, amethyst (*Browallia*), calliopsis (dwarf), dusty-miller (*Centaurea gymnocarpa*), California poppy (*Eschscholtzia*), gazania (*Gazania splendens*), transvaal daisy (*Gerbera*), satin

flower (*Godetia*), heliotrope, candytuft (*Iberis*), sultan's balsam (*Impatiens* (dwarf)), lantana, lobelia (trailing), double French marigold (dwarf), nasturtium, nicotiana (dwarf), blue cup flower (*Nierembergia*), petunia (trailing), phlox (dwarf) (*Phlox drummondii nana compacta*), rose moss (*Portulaca*), wishbone flower (*Torenia Fournieri*), verbena (dwarf), periwinkle (*Vinca*), pansy (*Viola cornuta*), and zinnia (dwarf).

Suggested colorful plants for containers: Begonia, begonia (tuberous rooted), chrysanthemum, geranium, and geranium (ivy-leaf).

Suggested textured plants for containers: Stonecrop (*Sedum*) and hens and chickens (*Sempervivum*).

Suggested foliage plants for interiors: Small plants—*Aglaonema* varieties, grape ivy (*Cissus* (*Vitis*) *rhombifolia*), *Dracaena* varieties, jade plant (*Crasula argentea* (*arborescens*)), Boston fern (*Nephrolepis exaltata bostoniensis*), heart-leaf philodendron (*Philodendron oxycardium* (*cordatum*)), and English ivy (*Hedera helix*).

Large plants—Madagascar dragon tree (*Dracaena marginata*), figs (*Ficus* varieties), split leaf philodendron (*Philodendron pertusum*), large leaved Mexican breadfruit (*Monstera deliciosa*), African pine (*Podocarpus macrophylla*), mock orange (*Pittosporum tobira*), and spineless Joshua tree (*Yucca elephantipes*).

Suggested plants for bonsai—many can be used, but the most popular are species of: Maples (*Acer*), hinoki cypress (*Chamaecyparis obtusa*), gardenia (*Gardenia jasminoides*), ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*), hollies (*Ilex*), junipers (*Juniperus*), oaks (*Quercus*), pines (*Pinus*), cherries (*Prunus*), dwarf pomegranate (*Punica granatum nana*), and zelkova.