



Growing Fruit in Containers

Container gardening is an activity that is growing at a rate of nearly 20% per year according to the National Gardening Association. Vegetables, flowers, herbs, and ornamentals are frequently grown in containers on patios, porches, and decks. However, there is trend now to plant both tree fruits and small fruit in containers for their unique growth characteristics and the diversity that they provide.

Containers

Fruit can grow in many types and sizes of containers including wooden, ceramic, metal or plastic tubs, buckets, pots, or even grow bags. Most fruit require a large amount of water, so a fairly large container is necessary to prevent plants from drying out. If there is a substantial amount of soil in a container, it will serve as a reservoir for water and thus be available during dry periods or when water loss from the plant is high. It is necessary to have holes in the bottom of the container to allow good water drainage. Further, it may be helpful to have stones or gravel in the bottom to aid water drainage.

Soil

An ideal soil will have good water and nutrient holding capacity, have a sufficient amount of air to assure good root growth, and be heavy enough so that the container and plant to not fall over. Garden soil used alone is not recommended because it lacks sufficient aeration, may contain weed seeds, water drainage may be too slow, and frequently it is deficient in organic matter. Garden soil or commercial top soil can be used if they are amended with peat and either vermiculite or perlite. An appropriate mix might contain 2 parts top soil, 1 part peat, and 1 part vermiculite or perlite. Generally, it is appropriate to mix in a cup of lime for each bushel of mix prepared. Commercial potting mixes are available, but if used alone, are generally too light and dry out too rapidly to be acceptable.

Location and Care

Full sun is not necessary to grow containerized fruit, although 5 to 6 hours of sun is appropriate to maintain good plant vigor. Containerized plants dry out quickly, so during periods of high temperature, it may be necessary to water a plant once, or even twice, a day. You must obtain some experience with frequency of watering required since it will depend upon the location, soil mix, container size, and the weather.

TREE FRUIT

Only dwarf trees or trees propagated on very dwarfing rootstocks are appropriate for container culture. This information is available from the nursery or it can usually be found in the nursery catalog. Semi-dwarf trees are too vigorous to be successfully cultured in containers. Recently, genetic dwarfs of apple and peach have become available. Since they are naturally dwarf they do not require a special size-controlling rootstock.

Most striking among the new selections are the columnar apple trees. They grow with little or no branching so they give the appearance of leaf-covered poles bearing fruit. They are certainly eye-catching specimens that would add variety and character to any area. These are best used as ornamentals since the quality of fruit is generally not up to par with commercial apple varieties available in the grocery stores. Tops of trees are cold hardy enough to withstand temperatures down to -15 °F. Tree roots may be injured by temperatures as low as 0 °F. Therefore, during the winter the roots of these trees should be protected to reduce the chance of winter injury.

SMALL FRUIT

Small fruit are underutilized as patio plants. Since special dwarfing characteristics are not necessary, easy to obtain commercial varieties are suitable for any container project.

Strawberries - There are several ways one can grow strawberries, and your choice will depend upon the type of plant you are looking for. Strawberries can be grown as single large plants that achieve a size of 12 inches in height and diameter or more by the end of the season. To achieve this plant form, it will be necessary to cut off the runners as they grow from the leaf axils. On a single plant as many as 100 runners may grow, so weekly cutting during the summer will be necessary. These single plant specimens can be very attractive, especially with their large stature and large, glossy, dark green leaves.

Plants should be protected from the cold during the winter. The following year a substantial number of large attractive strawberries will be borne on these plants. Alternatively, strawberries can be grown as a hanging plant. At least three strawberry plants should be planted in a hanging basket. All runners that develop in the axils of leaves should be retained and allowed to grow. Additional daughter plants will be produced at the ends of these runners. By the end of the season it is possible to have many runners with plants that maybe 2 or 3 feet long. If protected during the winter, these too will produce fruit in June. Fertilization of strawberries monthly with a commercially available liquid fertilizer is appropriate.

Raspberries - The newest small fruit crop to be grown in containers is raspberries. They seem to be ideal for patios or porches where a 4 to 5 foot barrier is desired and where growing canes can be supported or tied up. Only fall bearing raspberries should be used. Heritage is the most popular fall bearing variety, but others are available. Raspberries should be grown in 3 to 5 gallon plastic containers. During the summer canes will grow, and these should be given some type of support. In August flowers will form at the ends of the canes and harvestable fruit will be ready by the end of August.

These raspberries will continue to produce fruit until frost. In late November, canes should be cut down and the containers protected with mulch for the winter. The following spring, shoots will start to grow and they will develop into flowering canes that will again produce fruit for a 2-month period during the fall. Plants will last in containers for several years, although it may be necessary to repot plants after the third growing season. Monthly application of a soluble fertilizer is appropriate for vigorous cane growth.

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