

Container gardening tips can pay off big

By ED HUTCHISON
Special to the Record-Eagle

If time, space or cash are short and you still want to grow plants this summer, turn to container gardening for a growing experience that can be as fulfilling as digging in the ground. More so every year, containers bring the best of the gardening experience to apartment balconies, duplex decks, home patios and other locations within easy reach just outside the door. Why "more so every year?" Each season brings a new crop of vegetable and flower varieties that are well matched to container gardening because they are compact, bushy and nice to look at and produce lots of flowers or vegetables. Store-bought soil mixes are now available that provide an ideal growing environment and containers themselves have undergone a quiet revolution in size, color, materials and perhaps most important, friendliness to plants because of built-in watering and drainage systems.

Container gardening has its natural limits, mostly because of the size or growing habits of a particular flower or vegetable. For example, it would be impractical to grow sweet corn in a container. Certainly containers big enough to hold the plant are available but the return for the space needed to grow a few ears of corn just isn't there to justify the effort. Other plants impractical for containers for this reason include pumpkins, watermelons, most sunflowers, some snapdragons, tall marigolds — basically anything that reaches more than 48 inches high at maturity or has a growth habit that is sprawling or skinny and not very attractive seen without blooms.

The list of what works well is far longer than what doesn't. The key as you pick and choose this spring is simple: Shop for plants that are prolific, compact, and bushy and 36 inches tall, or less, at maturity. Plants that grow taller can be unwieldy to handle.

The classic trio is this: Geraniums, cherry tomatoes and the redwood planter. Both plants were well-suited to growing in a container — and still are — and the redwood tub typically was sturdy, lasted from season to season, had good drainage and was available in a variety of sizes and the overall shape was more or less pleasing.

But there is so much more. Here are some tips to help you choose, plant and care for your container garden:

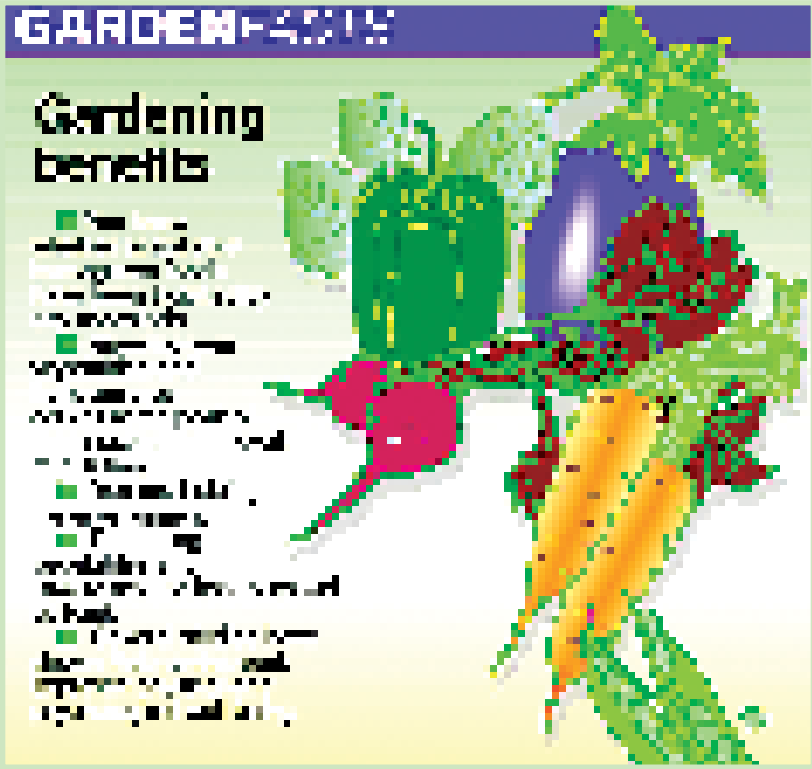
■ Soil — Probably the most important element. Use a store-bought mix labeled for containers or planters. Do not use bagged potting soil or soil dug from the garden. Both are too heavy in texture to be good for robust root growth. The mix you are after will be surprisingly light and probably won't contain any actual soil, but a blend of milled sphagnum peat moss, wood bark, perlite and other ingredients that combine to make a light mix with plenty of spaces between particles for oxy-



gen, moisture and nutrients to lodge. Roots love that!

■ Container — Plastic seems to be the preferred choice because it lightweight, available in many colors and shapes and is inexpensive. A nice alternative is terra-cotta look alike. Cedar and treated pine are popular materials too; redwood less so these days because of cost. Clay and terra cotta have simple, classic good looks but the soil

inside dries out more quickly because moisture evaporates from the clay surface, drawing moisture from the soil as it does. Choose a container of pleasing proportions to the mature plant. Use this guide: Plant growth above the rim can be about one and one-half times the height of the container or expressed in numbers: A container 12 inches tall will look in proportion to plants that grow 18 inches tall.



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Photo by Ed Hutchison

Left, even in this giant pot, the soil mix is light enough that the container can be easily lifted. Above, any types of plants — even daffodils — are well suited to container gardening.

■ Plants — mix and match to your heart's content, taking care to choose plants that have similar water and sun needs. For example, don't mix portulaca with impatiens. Portulaca likes things sunny, hot and dry while impatiens thrive in moist, shady situations. Limit the mix to four different plants in a large planter; fewer in smaller containers. When possible, add an airy or vining plant to provide welcome contrast in shape and texture to the mainstays of the

planting.

■ Daily care — probe the soil at least daily with a fingertip. If your finger comes out with dry

soil, it's time to water. Most containers require watering at least every third day and often, daily. Fertilize the plants monthly.



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