

## Gardening Guide

# Native Plants in Containers

Growing natives in containers is a delightful way to get close to nature, right on your doorstep. Beautiful, hardy, wildlife friendly native plants bring many rewards to those who want to grow gardens on balconies, patios, and rooftops. Easily accessible, container gardens can work well for anyone whose mobility is challenged. They are especially great for people on the move, since plants in containers are portable and will make each new apartment feel like home.

## Growing native plants in containers

Many native plants grow well in pots. Small shrubs and trees add year round interest, and the woody branches provide overwintering habitat for small fauna. Some may eventually outgrow their pots and need to be planted in the earth, but in the meantime you can be enjoying their presence.

Native perennials can be grown as a mass of a single species or mixed with others with similar requirements. Ferns and native grasses are also dramatic in pots.

Very tall perennials sometimes get too leggy to look good in a pot, so choose species under 2 feet. That said, with a very large pot, some large perennials like Joe-pye weed or perennial sunflowers will look great.

## General planting principles

- The bigger and deeper the pot, the stronger the plant and the less time between watering. Pots can be hand made cedar boxes, clay or cement (heavy), plastic, fabric grow bags, old tin buckets or trash cans (with drainage holes). The possibilities are many, depending on your imagination and budget. Large pots begin at 18-24" wide by the same depth (or larger, if you have the space). Medium pots are 14-18" and small pots 12".
- Daily watering in summer is the most demanding chore of plants in pots. It can be pleasurable but can not be neglected. If you need to go away for a few days and do not have a reliable neighbor to water while you are gone, there are many creative solutions.
- Organic potting soil grows the healthiest plants, but any pot mix can be improved with compost or a regular watering with liquid seaweed. If weight is an issue, perlite (expanded volcanic rock that looks like little white balls) will lighten the mix.

- Mulch the soil in the pots with leaf litter, rotted bark, or sand/ fine gravel for dry land species. Natural mulches protect the roots and provides habitat for overwintering and ground nesting pollinators.
- Planters in exposed locations may need to be protected in the winter with an insulating tarp, depending on what you are growing in them.

## Care and maintenance tips

### OBSERVE YOUR PLANTS

**Observation is important.** Regular inspection of your plants is part of their care.

### USE A DRIP SYSTEM FOR WATERING

Numerous types available, Recommended: 1/4-inch completely porous soaker hose.

- **Have a valve for every drip line.** Valves are like a faucet so you can turn them on and off and you can regulate the water flow to every container on the line. Different containers will require different amounts of water and one line for everything just won't work.
- **Expect your drip rate to be like the ticking of a clock.** If it's any faster, you run the risk of overwatering. If it's slower, your plants will be under-watered.
- **On hot days, run the drip system twice a day.** Run your drip system for 5 minutes on an average temperature day, one time per day. If it's over 90-degrees, run it two times per day.
- **Troubleshoot your watering system.** Sometimes a bit of sleuthing will reveal broken parts of a drip system. Go through your system, check your hose, pipes, valves, and manifold. Sometimes you have to look under the hood.

### DEAL WITH DEAD PLANT MATERIAL

Dead plant material provides shelter and sometimes food for wildlife and if it decays in place, the humus it produces conditions the soil and feeds beneficial soil organisms.

- **Disease** - Prune and destroy diseased plant material.
- **Deadheading pros & cons** -. Deadheading gives a plant more energy so it can continue to produce more flowers. **Compost** - Dead stems and leaves should remain on non-woody plants through the winter , then can be collected in spring and composted. Compost may be used to top-dress the soil surface.

### WHAT TO DO ABOUT PESTS?

Note that native plants are meant to be food for other wild creatures. Some damage is acceptable. If a plant's survival is threatened, you may take steps to protect the plant without doing harm to your garden's wildlife.



- **Remove by hand.** Slugs and aphids are easy to peel off and remove. A strong spray of water will remove aphids, or squash them by hand. Aphids can be squashed or killed by a strong stream of water.
- **Recognize the interaction between pest and beneficial insects.** Beneficial wasps and beetles such as ladybugs prey on gardens pests. Encourage the presence of beneficials and let them do their job.

#### CHOOSE THE RIGHT CONTAINER

The type of container you select will have a big impact on the success of your plants.

- **Container size is more important than shape.** The larger the container, the better. They're easier to manage and you can water less often.
- **Use fiberglass or glazed ceramic containers.** Fiberglass is lightweight and comes in variety of designs. Ceramic containers have thick walls which hold in moisture, are frost resistant, and don't absorb water, but they are heavy.
- **Avoid terra cotta.** In the winter it freezes and cracks. In the summer, it absorbs and takes away water from the plants.
- **Avoid metal containers.** Absorb heat, can become too warm for proper plant growth, may scorch your plants. Only use in the shade.

#### PREPARE YOUR CONTAINER CORRECTLY

The container is the home of your plants and it needs proper attention and preparation.

- **Use 5/8-inch drainage holes.** Any smaller is inadequate drainage. Any larger, and too much soil falls through. A 3 cubic foot container, should have 2 drainage holes.
- **Raise containers off the ground.** Your container should not sit flat on the surface or it won't drain properly. Lift it 1/4-1/2-inch off the ground.
- **Use saucers to eliminate staining concerns, not to hold water.** A container is not lifted enough when it's sitting in a saucer which can cause plant roots to rot. If you use a saucer, raise the container so it can get some air space, and always remove excess water out of the saucer.

Sources:

McCargo, Heather. **Balcony gardens – Natives in pots for urbanites and people on the move**, Wild Seed Project. <https://wildseedproject.net/2016/01/balcony-gardens-natives-in-pots-for-urbanites-and-people-on-the-move/>

Dizmon, Khara. **Success Secrets for Healthy Container Gardens**, Garden Design. <https://www.gardendesign.com/containers/success-tips.html>

## Natives to grow in containers

### For a shady location

- **Woody shrubs in large pots**

Witch hazel *Hamamelis virginiana*  
Bush-honeysuckle *Diervilla lonicera*

- **Perennials for medium pots**

Ferns – Christmas fern *Polystichum acrostichoides*, Maidenhair fern *Adiantum pedatum*, Lady fern *Athyrium filix-femina*  
Solomon's seal *Polygonatum biflorum*  
Cranesbill geranium *Geranium maculatum*  
Baneberry *Actaea rubra* or *A. pachypoda*  
Jack-in-the-pulpit *Arisaema triphyllum*  
Canada Columbine *Aquilegia canadensis*  
Jacob's ladder *Polemonium reptans*  
False Solomon's seal *Maianthemum racemosum*  
Blue lobelia *Lobelia siphilitica*  
Cardinal flower *Lobelia cardinalis*  
Wood asters– *Symphotrichum cordifolium*, *Eurybia divaricata*, *E. macrophylla*  
White snakeroot *Ageratina altissima*

- **Small perennials for window boxes or small pots**

Woodland stonecrop *Sedum ternatum*  
Violet *Viola blanda*, *V. cucullaria*,  
Virginia waterleaf *Hydrophyllum virginianum*  
Wild ginger *Asarum canadense*  
Woodland strawberry  
Wood phlox *Phlox divaricata* and *P. stolonifera*  
Pennsylvania sedge

### For a mostly sunny location

- **Small trees in large pots**

Smooth Serviceberry *Amelanchier laevis*

- **Shrubs for medium pots**

Sweet-pepperbush *Clethra alnifolia*



Lowbush blueberry *Vaccinium angustifolium*  
Beaked Hazelnut *Corylus cornuta*

- **Perennials in medium pots**

Swamp or common milkweed *Asclepias incarnata*, *A. syriaca*

Canada anemone *Anemone canadensis*

Golden Alexander *Zizia aptera*

Lanceleaf coreopsis *Coreopsis lanceolata*

Blackeyed Susan *Rudbeckia hirta*

Purple, \* Pale Purple, Grey-headed coneflower *Echinacea* species

Cardinal flower *Lobelia cardinalis*

Foxglove beardtongue *Penstemon digitalis*

Smooth Aster *Symphotrichum laevis*

Blue stem goldenrod *Solidago caesia*

Grasses: Switch grass *Panicum virgatum* , Little Bluestem *Schizachryium scoparium*, Sideoats grama,

Prairie Dropseed

## In a hot, sunny exposed location

- **Woody plants for medium to large pots**

Chokecherry *Aronia melanocarpa*

Low blueberry *Vaccinium angustifolium*

Bayberry *Morella pensylvanica*

Wild rose *Rosa virginiana*, *R. carolina*

New Jersey tea *Ceanothus americanus*

Meadowsweet *Spirea alba*, *S. tomentosa*

Bearberry *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*

- **Perennials for small to medium pots**

Wild strawberry *Fragaria virginiana*

Violets *Viola pedata*, *Viola adunca*

Blue-eyed grass *Sisyrinchium* spp.

Pussytoes *Antennaria* spp.

Sundial lupine *Lupinus perennis*

Scotch bellflower *Campanula rotundifolia*

Butterfly milkweed *Asclepias tuberosa*

Nodding onion *Allium cernuum*

Hairy Beardtongue *Penstemon hirsutus*

Black-eyed Susan *Rudbeckia hirta*

Smooth aster *Symphotrichum laevis*,