

## Container Gardening with Fruit

Colorful, attractive tree fruits, such as apples, peaches and plums will grow beautifully in containers and small spaces. Include berries – strawberries, blueberries, and raspberries - to enjoy fresh fruit all summer. An added bonus is the attractive and diverse ornamental value of flowers, fruits and foliage that will enhance any outdoor living space, no matter how small.

### 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 plants require a large amount of water, so a sizeable container is necessary to prevent plants from drying out. A substantial amount of soil in a container will serve as a reservoir for water and thus be available during dry periods or when water loss from the plant is high. Be sure the container has holes in the bottom to allow good water drainage. An inch or two of small stones or gravel in the bottom will aid water drainage. Keep in mind that if soil freezes, pottery containers tend to crack and break.

### Soil

An ideal soil will have good water and nutrient holding capacity, have a sufficient amount of air to assure proper root growth, and be heavy enough so that the container and plant do 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 topsoil, 1 part peat, and 1 part vermiculite or perlite. Generally, except for blueberries, 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; 5 - 6 hours of sun will 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. The location, soil mix, container size, and the weather will determine the frequency of watering required. Take care not to overwater; plant roots need air as well as water. Always test the soil with your fingers before watering.

### 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 in reputable nursery catalogs. Semi-dwarf trees are too vigorous to be cultured successfully 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. These eye-catching specimens would add variety and character to any area. They 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 when temperatures fall to 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, such as strawberries, blueberries and raspberries 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, with their full stature and large, glossy, dark green leaves, can be especially attractive.

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, runners up to 2 or 3 feet long spill over the edge of the basket. If protected during the winter, these too will produce fruit in June. Fertilize strawberries monthly with a commercially available liquid fertilizer.

**Raspberries** - The newest small fruit crop for containers is raspberries. They are ideal for patios or porches where a 4 - 5 foot hedge or barrier is desired. Raspberries should be grown in 3 to 5 gallon plastic containers. Tie or fasten the growing canes to thin stakes or a trellis to support the growing canes as they grown through the summer. Only fall bearing raspberries should be used. Heritage is the most popular fall bearing variety, but others are available. 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. Apply a soluble fertilizer monthly to promote vigorous cane growth.

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