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Planting Trees & Shrubs in Containers

While the beauty of a successful container garden may be extremely rewarding, the care and maintenance of these types of plantings can pose certain challenges. Primary amongst these challenges is the fact that plants are much less hardy when we try to over-winter them above ground. Indeed, most plants require extra T.L.C when grown in containers, and still tend to be short lived. Before embarking on a container garden that includes trees & shrubs, you must consider the possibility that these materials may need to be replaced as often as every 1-5 years. There are four primary issues that make it difficult to grow trees & shrubs in containers:

1. **Decreased Soil Mass** - Limited container size means less room for soil, which results in less room for root development and a greater chance that plants will become root bound.
2. **Temperature Swings** - The limited soil mass and exposure of the container can cause drastic changes in soil temperature throughout the season. These temperature changes can stress your container plants.
3. **Moisture Loss** - Excessive heat, high wind, and a decreased soil mass will result in faster moisture loss for your container plants. You must water them regularly. Rainfall alone is not sufficient.
4. **Poor Drainage** - Despite the need for supplemental watering, your container plants cannot be sitting in water. Make sure your containers have adequate drainage.

When preparing to purchase materials for a container garden, check the exposure of the area where you want to put your containers. How much sun does it get? What direction does it face? It is also helpful to take pictures and measurements of the space and/or draw a diagram. Having this information will simplify the buying process and help you make better decisions when purchasing your plants and containers.

If you have any questions, please call or email our Tree & Shrub department.
Tree & Shrub Phone: 773-769-8217 ♦ treesandshrubsgethsemane@yahoo.com

Choosing a Container

Gethsemane's Statuary Department carries many different kinds of containers in a variety of sizes, shapes, and materials. Resin containers are very popular because they are lightweight and long lasting. Iron, cement, and cast stone containers are also great, but they can be very heavy and difficult to move. These heavier containers can be a great choice for high-rise buildings where intense winds can be problematic. The additional weight helps to stabilize the container during windstorms. When planting trees and shrubs above ground, bigger containers are always better. The larger container size allows for greater root growth. Remember: plants may eventually outgrow the container. Lastly, make sure the containers you purchase have drainage holes. If there are no drainage holes in the container, ask if they can be drilled for you.

Planting and Irrigation

When planting trees and shrubs, the root flare (the area where the roots first start to emerge from the base of the plant) should be at or slightly above the soil line. The soil line should be 2-4" below the rim of the container. To start:

- Add a 1-3" layer of rock/gravel to the bottom of the container. The rocks will help improve drainage.
- Fill about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the container with a high grade potting soil.
- Make a funnel in the center by pushing some of the soil up against the sides of the container.
- Remove the plant from the grower's pot, break up the root ball, and spread apart the roots.
- Settle the plant in the center of the container, add enough soil to cover the exposed roots, and push down firmly to secure the plant in place.
- Water the plant immediately after you finish planting it. While you water for the first time, watch the bottom of the container and make sure the water is draining properly. There is no "formula" to determine how often you need to water your container plants. Every location and container is different. Check the soil moisture every 24-48 hours. If it is dry, water the plant until the soil is fully saturated. Following this schedule for the first 4-6 weeks after planting

should give you a better understanding of how often the plant needs water. Please remember that varying weather conditions will affect how often you need to water your container plants.

Winter Maintenance

Over-wintering trees and shrubs in containers can be difficult, but there are steps you can take to protect your container plants during the winter.

- Layering insulation (such as burlap or landscape fabric) around the container can help protect the plant's root system from extreme cold. Repeated temperature swings, such as freeze and thaw cycles during early spring, can "trick" your plant into budding/leafing out early. Buds and leaves are not as cold hardy as the woody parts of the plant and may be damaged by spring freezes. Keeping the insulation in place until we have consistent day and night temperatures above 50° F can help prevent premature bud break.
- Grouping your container plants together (with the hardiest plants on the perimeter) can also help protect them.
- Just because it's cold, it doesn't mean you can stop watering. Your plants need moisture during the winter, especially broadleaf and needled evergreens. The best solution is to put ice cubes on top of the soil in the container. The ice will slowly melt during warmer daytime temperatures, providing essential moisture. You will need to add more ice throughout the winter as it melts.