

Container Gardening tips from Gethsemane Garden Center

Is this your first time planting a container? Before you head to Gethsemane, here are a few criteria you should consider. This will help you select the perfect flowers, edibles, and containers for your space, and achieve success in your gardening endeavors.

1. What type of sun exposure do you have?

When growing in containers (either inside or outside on a deck or patio) light exposure is very important. You may look at a plant that says “full sun” and might not know what that means. To break it down:

- “Full Sun” = 6-8 hours of sunlight
- “Partial Sun” = 4 hours of sunlight
- “Partial Shade” = 2-3 hours of sunlight
- “Shade” = 2 or less hours of sunlight

Which direction you face also plays a part in the type of light you get. Western & Southern facing homes get a longer afternoon sun. This is ideal for many plants including most edibles. Edibles also need “full sun” to “partial sun” (be mindful of any neighborhood buildings that will block your light) for continual harvesting of herbs, vegetable, and/or fruits during the season.

2. Be aware of the wind.

This is something not all gardeners consider when choosing where and what to plant. We are the “Windy City” and the breezes off the lake can be uncomfortable for both you and your plants. Many taller edibles such as tomatoes, dill, and parsley can actually break in gusty winds. Also, hot windy days can evaporate water more quickly, requiring you to water more often. The weather in Chicago is unreliable, so even though we have been having nice weather we could still have a

cold spell. Wind chills affect your plants too. Most annuals and edibles need to be covered if the temperature falls below 40°. You can protect your plants by covering them with a sheet or freeze-cloth. If the container is small you can cover it with an empty bucket or box (make sure to weigh it down so the wind doesn't knock it off). Delicate herbs, like basil, should be brought inside.

3. What size container is best?

Know your space when you come into Gethsemane to select your container. Size can be hard to judge when looking at a container in the garden center. Having measurements will help you stay on track. In addition, it is important to consider what you are planting. Tomatoes, for example, grow tall and have long roots. If you want to grow tomatoes you need at least a 5-gallon container for 1 plant. (There are a few dwarf varieties that can be grown in a smaller container). Once you know what size container fits, it will be a lot easier selecting which plants and how many you can grow in your space.

Remember! All containers need drainage holes. If you purchase a container from Gethsemane without a hole, we will drill one for you. If you try to grow plants without proper drainage, water will build-up at the bottom and cause root-rot.

4. How much are you willing to water?

When choosing what you want to grow, think about how much time you have to give to your plants. Some plants are more draught tolerant and can withstand a little unintended neglect and some are much more delicate needing you to remember to water it regularly. Soil in containers will dry out more quickly than soil in the ground, so even if your containers are outside you should not depend on rain to quench their thirst. The best way to tell if your plant needs water is to simply stick your finger into the soil. If a few inches down into the soil is still damp, you don't need to water. If it is dry as you push your finger down, then you will want to water. Be sure you are watering deep in your containers for healthy roots. It is important to see water coming out of the drainage holes before you

stop. Gethsemane does carry some self-irrigating containers, such as Earthboxes, that have become very popular. They are designed so you can water less often, and your plants still get all the water they need.

Helpful hint: Water your plants in the morning, not at night. The damp soil will give your plants plenty to drink during the hot afternoon sun. If you water at night the sun cannot evaporate water off the plant's leaves, making it more susceptible to disease.

5. Plant maintenance.

Once you have your flowers and edibles planted, you want to get the most out of them. Remember to deadhead and fertilize. Flowers take a lot of energy from your plant. By removing old blooms, or “deadheading”, you are directing all of your plant's energy to producing new flowers. This will help keep your containers looking lush and full making for healthier plants. When you have herbs you will be harvesting instead of deadheading. Make sure you harvest from the top down. This will help your plant stay strong and grow new leaves for you to enjoy. When planting in containers you always want to start with a rich potting soil. This will give your plants the nutrients it needs. As the plant uses up those nutrients you need to be adding more. Gethsemane has many great options for adding nutrients including organic fertilizers. It is helpful to use a slow release fertilizer that can be mixed into the soil and will slowly break down with each watering. This will keep a steady supply of nutrients for your plants and less for you to worry about.