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The versatility of container gardening

Written by
Laura DePrado

Container gardening is an easy and versatile way to enjoy an instant garden.

Because container gardens are easy to establish, they are great to use when starting an enabling garden. Enabling gardens are accessible, barrier-free spaces, small, medium, or large, indoors or outdoors, which allow for safe and maximum participation. Container gardens' versatility and range of materials, sizes and shapes accommodate any design style or budget.

Container gardens designed to accommodate people with impaired mobility must reflect the abilities, interests and needs of the gardeners. Ultimately, the size and position of the containers in the garden are determined by the height, reach and limits and general mobility of the gardener, or participant. People who use wheelchairs, electric scooters, walkers, or canes will need containers placed on or adjacent to a level, or hard surface with well-drained paving and good traction. There are many paving choices, of which I will write about in a future article.

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These step-down planters with metal tray tables are supported by brick for ease of access for children through seniors. Planters offer a place to rest, and provide support for participants while they plant and maintain the garden. (Photo: LAURA DePRADO)

Container location

Containers can be placed on patios, balconies, rooftops, walkways, outside doorways, or decks — anywhere they are easily accessible and sited in appropriate light conditions to support healthy plants. In addition to freestanding containers, other options include window boxes, which can be anchored to fences, desks, or balconies at appropriate heights. On larger paved areas, you can cluster containers of varying heights; for example, 18, 20 and 24 inches high. This is known as the “step down” design and this arrangement is very accessible to a seated or standing gardener and creates the image of a larger three-dimensional planting space.

When selecting a container for gardeners with mobility impairments, remember to consider the gardener’s current and future abilities as well as their special interests. To encourage comfortable gardening, gardens planned for groups of people with varying mobility might include containers of various sizes and heights. The containers also offer the versatility of new arrangements by individuals and groups season after season.

Container size

In the barrier-free garden, large containers are best. Large size means more space to garden, and less watering than smaller ones. Large containers also have weight and stability, so gardeners can lean on them for support. For easy gardening, containers should be between 18 and 30 inches high. Gardeners must be able to reach across the

center of containers, whether they are positioned singly or in clusters. When seated, the average person has a reach of approximately 30 inches. Freestanding containers can be up to 60 inches across, since they are accessible from all sides and allow gardeners to reach the center at all times. Window boxes, wall pots or small standard pots can be attached to railings, fences or walls at heights ranging from 18 to 60 inches to accommodate the reach of most gardeners whether seated or standing.

Container materials

Choose durable, low-maintenance materials for all containers. Recommended choices include plastic, wood, ceramic, decorative clay and terra cotta, concrete and metal.

Plastic is perhaps the best choice, as plastic containers are lightweight, low-cost and indistinguishable from the more expensive decorative clay or stone containers. They are available in many shapes, colors and designs. Look for pots that will not break down with full sun conditions.

Wood is another great choice, but look for rot-resistant wood such as cedar. Recycled oak whiskey barrels are inexpensive and usually last about 10 years. Teak is also great but more expensive. Ceramic, decorative clay and terra cotta are heavier than wood or plastic and usually more expensive and vary in strength, weight and durability. The downside is that because they are porous, the soil will dry out quickly and they will need emptying and winter storage to prevent breakage. Concrete is the most durable material, and it can be made into many different shapes. It is sometimes dyed to a wide range of colors or finished with pea-sized pebbles embedded into the exterior. Concrete should be avoided on rooftops or balconies where weight is a concern. Metal is a durable material that is commonly used in smaller containers such as window boxes. It costs about the same as wood or plastic. Because metal tends to absorb heat, metal containers in full sun can become dangerously hot to the touch.

With the variety of materials, styles and sizes, containers can fit any need on any budget. However, size, height and placement are key factors to keep in mind when creating a container garden that is barrier-free, accessible and low maintenance.

Laura DePrado is a horticultural therapy practitioner and horticultural specialist:
Laura@finaltouchplantscaping.com, 908-872-8387, finaltouchplantscaping.com