

# { creativity contained }

*Give new life to old items with container gardens.*

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or centuries, people have been fascinated by the idea of growing small gardens in containers. For instance, the ancient Romans cultivated container plants in the courtyards of their villas, and medieval monks grew herbs in their cloisters. During the past decade, container gardening has experienced a resurgence, partly due to city dwellers'

lack of space and time for full-scale gardening, but container gardening isn't just for cramped urbanites. Even on an expansive farm, container gardens can add personality, creativity and panache to the landscape.

Well-placed pots of blooms actually serve as finishing touches for even the largest landscapes. No matter how large the landscape is, "I always recommend using some pots; it's like the dot on the i," says Will Lambert, owner of Lambert Landscape Design/Build in Florence, Ala. "Those are the finishing touches. It's a lot like adding

accessories inside the house. You always buy your couch and TV and other big furniture, but if you don't accessorize, it doesn't look finished. It's the same way outside; the container plantings are the accessories that finish the whole look."

And while your acreage may yield many of the same crops as others nearby, containers offer an easy way to personalize your farm. "Containers are a great way to dress up a front porch or a back patio for seasonal decorating," says Amy Ridgway, owner of Cumming, Ga.-based Happy Potter. "Without much trouble, you can create something that looks completely different from your neighbors."

## Finding a Container

Many of the most popular containers, such as those made of cast stone and solid concrete, create a timeless look but come with a hefty price tag. If you really want to create a piece with character, start your search nearby—"found" materials are not only inexpensive, but they also make some of the most interesting planters. Even if you're watching your budget closely, you can decorate your farm, porch or patio with one-of-a-kind planters using items in your garage, outbuildings or attic, or with bargain



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Anything that holds dirt can be used for planting—this trash container is a perfect example.



BRENDA NELSON

If you choose a container without drainage holes in the bottom, you can drill some yourself or line the bottom with moss, pea gravel or broken clay pots.

pieces you might find at a garage sale or flea market.

"Anything that holds dirt can be planted," says Eric Weathersbee, proprietor of Fifth Season Design in Raleigh, N.C. "I often use antique crock pots as centerpiece overflowing with herbs for the kitchen. I've even used an old chest of drawers, pulling each drawer out at a different length and planting them with annuals. Old shoes make a great home for groundcovers like hens-and-chicks or ajuga and look great at the garden gate. The

selection is limited only by your imagination."

Kerry Kelley, annuals manager at Davidsonville, Md.-based Homestead Gardens, has planted in purses, hats, suitcases, colanders, jewelry boxes, cradles and typewriters. "Even old clothes can be used, as long as the bottoms are tied to hold the soil," he says. "Imagine a pair of planted jeans and a flannel shirt hanging on the clothesline."

Some of the most memorable containers are those that come with a history. "In my grandfather's old barn, I spotted some old turkey-egg baskets, which became my first experiment—using sphagnum moss to line the basket and hold the soil and plants in," says Brenda Nelson, owner of Garden in a Pot in Fort Worth, Texas. "Also, I've used the old, double wash basins that my grandmother had and even an old washing machine that no longer works."

As lovely as the finished plantings can be, those hints of history accompanying found containers can be just as appealing as the blooms and blossoms. "Isn't there just something about being surrounded by things from the past that makes the world feel a little calmer and a little gentler?" Kelley says. "Every time I see [found container gardens], I wonder where those things have been, what they've seen and what life was like for the folks that had them—kind of a 'stop and smell the roses' sort of thing. It's comforting."

Not only can found materials be turned into containers, but they can also make interesting embellishments for plantings. Ridgway suggests raiding your craft drawer for



FERRY WILD

## Container Gold

The best planting containers for your farm are the ones that please you and fit into the character of your home. They might be found anywhere—in an antique shop, at a flea market, even in your barn or basement—but if you want ideas for the most sought-after items to plant in, look no further. Professional floral designers who specialize in “found” containers say these are some of their favorite planters:

- An old wringer washing machine
- The horn from a Victrola (to be used as a hanging basket by attaching a chain)
- An old chair with an empty seat
- Old whiskey barrels
- Birdhouses or bird feeders
- Livestock troughs
- Old washtubs
- Old glass milk jugs (dress them up by adding decorative stones in the bottom)
- Antique furnishings (plant in plastic containers and place inside to avoid damage)

While the thriller-filler-and-spiller strategy is a helpful guide, Weathersbee says he often doesn't use many trailing plants with a found container because the container itself may be the true focus of the planting. If you're using a unique found container, choose plants that will complement its colors and style. Annuals offer “tons of options in size and color,” Weathersbee says, “and herbs are a great choice for planting in found containers because they give you that old-style look with the benefit of something for your culinary endeavors.” He warns against planting shrubs or small trees in antique or older, fragile containers, as these plants sometimes have thick root systems that could cause damage to the container when you try to remove them.

Group plants according to their needs for sunlight, shade and water, so that everything in your container will be able to thrive. And “if you really want a good, full, nice look, overfill the pots with plantings,” Lambert says. “Focus on making sure it looks good for one season.” While you may have to replace some plantings each season to keep your container looking good, keep in mind that buying another \$25 boxwood is cheaper than redoing an entire flowerbed.

In fact, the experts recommend changing out a container's plants seasonally anyway. While you may



TOP: GRUENE TEXAS HISTORIC DISTRICT. BOTTOM: ORISTMILL RIVER RESTAURANT & BAR

keep the same centerpiece, such as a pyramidal boxwood, and hanging ivy on the outside edge all year long. Lambert suggests filling in with seasonal colors, such as petunias in the spring, begonias in the summer, pansies in the fall and winter, and maybe some rosemary at Christmastime. ★

Nancy Mann Jackson writes frequently about home and garden topics and spends much of the spring and summer in her family's vegetable garden.

*Top: Washtubs are nice planting containers for dressing up farmstead landscapes.*

*Bottom: Old farm items like this feed trough get a second life as a decorative planter.*

WEB LINK

Try containers for vegetables, too!  
Read more at [www.hobbyfarms.com/containergardens](http://www.hobbyfarms.com/containergardens)



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: BRENDIA NELSON, ERIC WEATHERS/BEE, HOMESTEAD GARDENERS

*Focus on making your containers look good for one season.*

*Hens-and-chicks are ideal for small planters, like old boots.*

*Trailing-type plants soften the look.*

ideas; she likes to tie bits of old Christmas wreaths, such as pinecones, fairies and bows, onto the plants in a container. She also attaches items such as small birdhouses to stakes to be placed inside container gardens.

"Other items can be used as trellises in a pot or garden, if you can bear to give them up," Kelley says. "Old flutes, clarinets, trombones, picture frames, tennis rackets, decorative curtain rods and floor lamps are good. And don't forget old shell or marble collections as soil covers."

While almost anything can be converted to a planter, it's important to consider drainage and toxicity before settling on a container. Make sure the item's contents are not toxic to the plants or the environment, Nelson says.

Lead-based paints used on the interior of the object, for example, could damage the plants and leach into soil.

As for drainage, if there are no holes in the bottom of the container, you can drill some yourself or simply line the container with moss or coconut moss. Another option is to add broken bits of clay pots or pea gravel in the bottom of the container to help with drainage. "Or plant things that don't mind having wet feet," Weathersbee says.

## Filling the Pot

Once you've chosen a container, the messy fun finally begins. The ultimate creation should reflect your own sense of style, but the most impressive containers usually include a mixture of blooming plants, often trimmed with ivy or another trailing plant drooping over the outside edges.

Nelson uses the "thriller, filler and spiller" rule of thumb to create a well-rounded, well-composed planter. The thriller is a focal point, perhaps an unusual plant or a centerpiece like an Alberta spruce or a boxwood shrub. The filler, or "fluff," fills in the container without taking over. It might be ferns or annual blooming plants. Finally, the spiller is created by the plants that fall or spill over the edge of the container, such as hanging ivy. "This softens the edge and makes it complete," Nelson says. "Without the spiller, your container just doesn't have the full composition that a well-planted container needs."



*Clockwise from top: When planting your container gardens, group plants according to sun, shade and water requirements.*

*Using an old washtub, overflow it with plants to get a nice, full look.*



*Using the "thriller-filler-and-spiller" approach isn't always best—especially when the found container is the centerpiece, like these crocks.*

*Different plants and container sizes can be combined to add interest to a container garden.*



*Whiskey barrels are a favorite for professional floral-container designers, bringing lots of character to their surroundings.*



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ERIC WEATHERS/BEE, BERENGA NELSON, ERIC WEATHERS/BEE, AMY RIDGWAY, GRIFFINMILL RIVER RESTAURANT & BAR