

Questions about Birds:

How can one keep birds from nesting in hanging containers?

Research indicates the following methods may be helpful:

Provide plenty of other nesting sites in your garden. Erect birdhouses and nesting boxes.

At planting, lay light wire mesh over the basket or container, so birds can't get in to build nests.

Make sure this mesh is no larger than ¼ inch because birds can and will become tangled in it.

Use fake predators to discourage them from your containerized area. These might include rubber snakes or a fake owl.

Set streamers along the edges of your pot garden or where you hang baskets. This will prevent birds nesting by scaring them to a more "secure" location.

What plants attract hummingbirds?

First, go the route of native plants. This site provides a list of natives, most of which can be successfully planted in the right size container. Note planting zone and cultural requirements:

[Best Bets for Pollinators-V2 \(mgnv.org\)](http://mgnv.org)

Here is another, but not all are natives. Again, please note planting zone and cultural requirements:

[10 Great Plants for Attracting Hummingbirds \(thespruce.com\)](http://thespruce.com)

Questions about Containers:

How to handle tall, narrow (column-like) containers (those often placed next to entries). In particular, do you need to fill the entire planter with soil even though it seems roots will probably not grow that deep?

To avoid that perched water table problem (where water puddles when it cannot drain through the soil and out the drainage hole), the best practice is to use potting soil, and you can revive already used soil with compost (2/3 used potting soil and 1/3 compost mixture); that practice can save you money on bagged soil. If you decide to go the route of using nonbiodegradable materials like pebbles, rocks, pellets, we recommend that every time you water your container that you check to make sure water is completely draining out. If it is not, there is some type of blockage that can create the perched water table issue that contributes to root rot.

Tips on growing veggies in fabric bags. I've had great initial success with tomatoes, only to see them die out later in the season. How to keep the veggies from drying out?

The porosity of fabric bags is the greatest downfall with their use. You must check your veggies daily, particularly as the summer heat kicks in. Use the finger test. If dry, water thoroughly. You can also add about a ¼ inch of mulch on the top; this should keep the bag hydrated a little bit more. Check to see if non-woven fabrics are available. They are less permeable.

Suggestions for economical containers and where to buy them?

I have visited those antique or roadside garden stores and asked for any discarded or used containers of any type. Habitat Restore has them sometimes, too. I haven't had luck at regular garden centers when asking for discarded or gently worn containers. As a gardener, I also request used containers on neighborhood listservs; that has been very successful. Tell your neighbors to save their containers or larger nursery pots. If word gets out you will take them, you will get them. Bargain stores also have them like Dollar Stores, but you must search. Make sure you verify that no toxic materials have been stored in the container.

Can terra cotta pots be painted on the inside with marine paint? Is marine paint toxic? HUSBAND HINT: once the paint dries it greatly loses its capacity to transmit toxicity since most of the toxic stuff is in the solvent.

We cannot advise on the application of marine paint to clay pots. Most marine paints are made with **toxic chemicals, including lead**, designed to leach out and prevent bottom growth on a boat hull. Antifoulant coatings are a threat to aquatic life. Use provides a potential hazard to the environment. Given that clay pots are quite porous, how can you guarantee that, even after drying, that some leaching will not occur? Instead we recommend sealants commonly used for sealing clay pots. Please find this article very helpful: [How to Seal Terra-Cotta Pots \(sfgate.com\)](http://sfgate.com)

What will thrive in the moisture of plastic?

Plastic pots have no porosity, so they retain moisture very well. Select plants that enjoy a moister environment/soil. Know your plant. Before you purchase or seed any varieties of plants, check the research about their soil needs, moist/dry/soiless, etc. There are many plants that do. Note whether the plant is a woody shrub, vegetable, annual/perennial, tree fruit, native vs non-native due to root structure habit.

Is there a risk of root rot from too much water retained with oversized or non-porous pots like there is with indoor houseplants? Or is it a lot less likely because of being outside?

Overwatering is the culprit for most problems with outside containers. However, sun exposure does help deter fungal problems and root rot bc of increased evaporation. Winds and breezes also help. To avoid root rot in oversized containers of any type, elevate the planter or at least make sure the saucer has no standing water over time. Elevation increases air circulation underneath the pot that the roots need for oxygen. Also, avoid excessive overhead watering; water directly into the planter until water drains from the pot. Use the finger test to check for dryness or wetness. Routine watering is not necessarily a good thing...water when the soil needs it.

Are self-watering containers breeding grounds for mosquitoes?

This is a very interesting question. Research indicates that these pots are a perfect breeding nest for mosquitoes. Pesky mosquitoes will lay their eggs there, and when they hatch, mosquitoes will multiply because of the perpetually soggy conditions. This article provides additional information about this issue: [Top 5 Problems with Self-Watering Pots and Their Remedies \(growtheherbs.com\)](https://growtheherbs.com)

Are there fabric grow bags (or compostable)?

After researching this issue, we learned there are advertised grow bags stating they are “thickened, nonwoven fabric.” Such ads also claim they are “environmentally friendly.” We cannot find further information about whether environmentally friendly means they are also compostable. In addition, “compostable” can communicate unclear meaning to the buyer. Will the bag decompose without releasing toxic materials into the compost? We suggest that you purchase with care, even inquiring what the company considers “compostable.” The following article explores the misuse of phrases like “compostable” and “environmentally friendly” on products:

[16 CFR § 260.7 - Compostable Claims. | CFR | US Law | LII / Legal Information Institute \(cornell.edu\)](https://www.cornell.edu/legal/16-cfr-260.7-compostable-claims/)

How about bamboo planting pots? They're a bit more expensive, but I've found them pretty resilient for windowsill gardening.

In researching bamboo as a material used in kitchens, clothing, and flooring (we found nothing directly related to planting containers), we concluded that all these products have a few things in common that can be considered applicable to planters:

- Bamboo that is harvested too young and/or not processed properly will NOT have the same durability as aged and properly treated product.
- This processing problem can cause the release of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) which can cause headaches and allergies in susceptible individuals.
- Although naturally antibacterial, it is quick to absorb moisture, which can encourage microbial growth.
- Tends to be more expensive.
- It is biodegradable.
- Lightweight, attractive, resists breakage.
- Bamboo is very popular for many products currently, and, as a result, improper harvesting practices abound. The impact on the environment can be devastating to native wildlife. When weighing the pros and cons of bamboo, make sure you are researching sustainably harvested bamboo products.

Do the biodegradables really last a whole season without degrading before winter?

In a study by the American Society for Horticultural Science, the following conclusion assessed the use of biocontainers: “Biocontainer lifespan can range from a few months to several years depending on the materials, biodegradable adhesives and binding agents, resins, and waxes that are used for container production. (Evans et al., 2010; Jordá-Vilaplana et al., 2017). Conneway et al. (2015) concluded that matching biocontainer type to the length of the crop cycle can be a successful strategy when using alternative containers.” In addition, container integrity shows that in “Greenhouse studies reported that plants grown in peat, cow manure, wood fiber, and rice straw pots could not be sold after production due to insufficient container integrity. In contrast, plants produced in plastic, rice hull, wheat starch, and recycled paper containers were sold and had unchanged container integrity after 14 weeks.” (Beeks and Evans, 2013b; Lopez and Camberato, 2011). These studies relate to greenhouse production. However, home gardener use will not be as intense as greenhouse production. Depending on the plant and its growth habit and the biomaterial used, it would not be unreasonable to expect container integrity to sustain throughout the growing season

So just soap & water is OK for disinfecting pots? I've been procrastinating on soaking pots with chlorine bleach and that would be great if I don't have to!

If you have NOT had fungal problems or excessive salt deposits, using warm, soapy water and rinsing well should be sufficient. If you have, use a solution containing one part household bleach to 9 parts water and soak for a minimum of 10 minutes.

What is a good liner material between the soil in the pot and the fill in the bottom layer of the pot?

We are unclear about “liner material” between soil and fill. Any obstruction that can potentially block drainage in a container is not recommended. If you use “fill” of any type in a large container, make sure it is not biodegradable. Also, every time you water, check for drainage through the drainage hole as evidence that no blockage is occurring. Any blockage can create a perched water table that can impact root health. Do use a coffee filter or wire mesh to retain soil over the drainage hole during watering.

Questions about Planting Medium:

Is pro-mix a good potting medium?

Pro-mix is an organic potting medium, containing various excellent ingredients. The greatest advantage is the inclusion of mycorrhizal fungi. This beneficial fungus colonizes the root tissue and stimulates increased water and nutrient uptake. This leads to increased plant growth. It’s a totally organic way to grow healthier, more productive plants. The downside is that a major ingredient is peat. Peat is instrumental in providing bulk volume. However, peat is also a nonrenewable resource, creating environmental challenges. Coconut coir or dehydrated coconut fibers is a renewable resource that provides the same benefits. Here is an article that provides more info: [Pro-Mix Soil: The Best Potting Soil for Organic Gardeners – Home for the Harvest](#)

What does soilless mean? Only perlite and vermiculite?

Soilless is predominantly comprised of sphagnum peat moss. Sphagnum peat moss is lightweight and inexpensive. Just as importantly, it’s well-draining yet water retentive. Granted, until the peat is thoroughly moistened with water, its particles can be very dry and dusty. Peat moss is slightly acidic, and most seed starting mixes have a soil pH of about 5.8, which is fine for starting most seeds. It contains little, if any, nutrients. Amendments should be added to improve drainage and aeration, such as perlite, vermiculite, bark, or coir. It is light weight. Remember also that peat is a nonrenewable resource. Most research indicates that soilless mixes do not support healthy growth for vegetables, due to insufficient medium structure and adequate nutrients. However, these can be adjusted, if you are willing to do the work/cost. This article provides more info: [What Is Soilless Potting Mix and Why Is It So Important? \(thespruce.com\)](#)

What's the difference between "potting medium" and "soilless mix?" It sounds like the same thing.

Soilless mix is a type of potting medium having no additional nutrients, as opposed to bagged potting media that contains additional nutrients. Peat, a nonrenewable resource, is a main ingredient.

What alternatives do you recommend for peat? this is a harvested resource that is not regrown and is running out.

The current research opinion is that coconut fibers or coir have the same characteristics as peat but IS a renewable resource. You can purchase coconut fiber in flat pieces that require rehydration for use.

I've made the error of using garden soil (novice here!) in my raised beds. I have used mushroom compost and some back kow when planting, but how do I know how much to use? I have raised wood beds 2 x 8 and 2x4.

Please contact the Extension Master Gardener Help Desk with questions about raised bed gardening:

mgaralex@gmail.com

Should we add the 1-2 inches of soil-less medium to veggies in container or avoid the medium altogether with veggies?

Soiless medium is not recommended for vegetables unless it is amended for nutrients and structure to support healthy roots. It is recommended for annuals. This article does provided additional information about amending soilless media: [What Is Soiless Potting Mix and Why Is It So Important? \(thespruce.com\)](https://www.thespruce.com/what-is-soiless-potting-mix-and-why-is-it-so-important-1182848)

Re-using planting medium: the following questions have one response

If you dump the soil and clean the pot, can you then reuse the soil? Or should you buy new every year?

I would like to know if one should dump the soil or reuse the soil from last year

Could you be specific about what should be added when soil is reused for multiple seasons?

How much nutrients do you add when you re-use your medium from prior years?

Can you use the same soil that was in the pots from previous years?

What kinds of nutrients should you add to older growing medium?

It is acceptable to reuse soil medium, unless the soil experienced fungal problems or excessive salt deposits. However, because of more frequent watering needs, nutrients will be washed out the drainage hole. Therefore, it is necessary to renew nutrients each season. Store used potting soil in a garbage can or similar container with a lid; this will discourage any fungal growth or insect encroachment. Using a large potting container for mixing, combine 2/3 used soil with 1/3 compost (2:1 ratio). After mixing, moisten the soil with water, mix thoroughly again, and test for friability. Friability is when you squeeze a handful of soil, it will come together in your hand, not being muddy or loose. It is recommended that you replace potting soil every 3-4 years, especially when transplanting a specimen.

Questions about Overwintering:

Do you water dormant plants over winter?

Yes, although this does depend on the plants. Usually, a small amount of water twice a month is sufficient.

How much light do overwintered plants need?

This does depend on the plant. However, also consider the micro-climate of the place you choose to overwinter plants. Your garage may have windows and abundant (but short-lived) sunlight during the day. Or it may have no sunlight at all. Sunlight and temperature are the two most important things to consider. *Planet Natural* recommends: “Know your plants. Some plants, like calla lilies and dahlias do best in a cool dark place. Some, like agave plants, like cool places but plenty of light. Some, like geraniums, need moist conditions. And some, like begonias and decorative sages, need warmth and light. Because winter days are short and don’t always offer enough sunlight to keep plants healthy, we can’t recommend grow lights enough for the plants that require brightness. These can be simple, T5 fluorescent fixtures, or bright spots specifically designed for sun-loving plants. Either way, lights can add warmth and interest to your indoor setting, as they highlight the plants they’re sustaining.”

Questions about varieties of plants:

Would appreciate tips for blueberries in containers and herbs

Almost a dozen varieties of blueberries can be grown in Northern Virginia. Try out Bluecrop, Jersey, Duke, and Top Hat cultivars for the biggest yield. The following article provides a step by step process to plant and grow blueberries in a container. However, we do not recommend the use of pesticides for management of maggots or other insects due to its impact on pollinators. If this occurs on your plants, contact your local Extension Help Desk for advice. Blueberries prefer an acidic pH, so occasion soil testing of your soil is necessary to sustain the nutrient environment blueberries prefer:

[How to Grow Blueberries in Containers \(thespruce.com\)](https://thespruce.com/how-to-grow-blueberries-in-containers)

With herbs in containers, well-draining soil and potting mix are the keys to success. Therefore, research indicates that successful container herbs use a potting media that is a commercial soilless mix because it drains well and is lightweight. This publication provides further insights:

[Growing Vegetables in Containers | University of Maryland Extension \(umd.edu\)](https://extension.umd.edu/publication/growing-vegetables-in-containers)

I am eager to hear anything about veggie beds!

Please contact the Extension Master Gardener Help Desk for information regarding in ground vegetable beds.

I have a container with mint from last year and it has already started growing. Should I do anything with the soil? It is from last year.

Yes, you need to replace nutrients. Feed container mint a balanced, all-purpose liquid fertilizer in early spring when new growth emerges. Fertilize every four to six weeks after that and throughout the growing season. Nutrients leach away quicker from potted plants that are frequently watered. This article provides further info about caring for mint: [How to Grow Mint \(thespruce.com\)](https://thespruce.com/how-to-grow-mint)

Any recommendations for plants to NEVER plant together?

The general rule of thumb about companion planting is to know the growing requirements of the plants. Group plants that require full sun together. Group plants requiring shade together. Group according to watering needs or soil pH requirements, etc. Plants will compete for nutrients and other requirements for healthy growth, so select plants that support the same environment. Research any toxic reactions some plants may have from one another. For example, do not locate a vegetable garden near black walnut trees because these trees emit a toxin known as juglone from their roots.

I have some Mint in my yard that i want to take out of the ground and put in containers. Do you have recommendations for this?

Mint is a fairly resilient herb. However, when digging it up, just like other transplants, shovel or spade away from the central root mass, particularly since there will be many rhizomes growing from the main mass (the cause of its invasive tendencies). If you sever some rhizomes, it should survive. Using that shovel or spade, identify a clump of mint with healthy, upright-growing stems and lots of green growth. If your climate had a harsh winter, there's likely a lot of dead brown stems. This is not a problem, but make sure you select a clump with green growth, to ensure you're moving a live plant with a robust root system. Choose a pot that's large enough for the plant to sit in comfortably, with room below for a fresh soil base of an inch or so, and enough space around the sides to fill in with new soil. This article provides more info about care and transplanting techniques. The info about transplanting from in ground to a container is near the end:

[How to Transplant Mint | Growing Mint in Pots | SproutedGarden.com](https://sproutedgarden.com/how-to-transplant-mint/)

What are some good fruit plants in the Arlington, VA area? thanks!

The following articles/presentations are located on our website. It should provide you with resources for our area: [fruit trees](#) | [Search Results](#) | [Master Gardeners of Northern Virginia \(mgnv.org\)](https://mgnv.org/)

Can you grow loganberries in containers?

Loganberries aren't the best for containers, but if you keep it well-pruned you should get a decent harvest out of potted plants. A large pot will work, at least 2 feet across and a foot deep. Just like in the garden, you want to prune out any old canes. But instead of a 10-cane bush, keep your plant down to a more manageable level of 5 or 6 fruiting canes. Give your plant a dose of fertilizer each spring, or a top-dressing of added compost. The following article provides more info:

[How to Grow Loganberries | Backyard Gardening Blog » Backyard Gardening Blog »](https://backyardgardeningblog.com/how-to-grow-loganberries/)

What small flower or flowering bush can you recommend putting in small clay pots for a Mother's Day gift? It needs to be inexpensive since I need 21 of them. Thanks!

We would recommend that you go the route of purchasing annuals because they are cheaper and provide many varieties to choose from. Some examples are sweet alyssum, forget me nots, French marigolds, and Mexican petunias. The following articles provides many more examples and advice for care. Happy Mother's Day! [Flowers for Small Pots \(sfgate.com\)](https://www.sfgate.com)

My sage plant died. It was in the ground. What is the best way to grow it? I lived on the ocean in Delaware. My rosemary loves it here!!

The most common culprit for sage health is too much water. For that reason, sage plants grow very well in pots and containers because of the favorable drainage conditions. However, it is important to plant sage in an appropriate pot or the sage can suffer. If the pot is too small the soil can dry out in the sun, too quickly for the sage to uptake enough water which causes poor growth and the plant to wilt. If too wet, this will contribute to disease and root rot. The following article provides more information:

[Growing Sage: The Complete Guide to Plant, Grow, and Harvest Sage \(morningchores.com\)](https://www.morningchores.com)

Questions about watering:

Do you recommend capturing runoff water and reusing it?

If you are referring to water in pot saucers, the fact is that drainage water will contain nutrient residues that could be a resource for watering, particularly if you also water using rain barrel harvesting. On the other hand, this effort could be very task oriented and tedious. Runoff water can be tricky, depending on its origins. For example, stormwater runoff can carry with it chemicals from lawn and garden fertilizers and other toxic elements. Reuse is a definite positive step, but research your options first. This article provides info about reuse of runoff: [Capturing rainwater and preventing runoff | Minnesota Pollution Control Agency \(state.mn.us\)](https://www.state.mn.us)

Do you recommend capturing water that drains out of pots and reusing it? What are the pros / cons of doing this? *Please see above response.*

Should you put stones at bottom of pots for drainage?

To avoid that perched water table problem (where water puddles when it cannot drain through the soil and out the drainage hole), the best practice is to use potting soil, and you can revive already used soil with compost (2/3 used potting soil and 1/3 compost mixture); that practice can save you money on bagged soil. If you decide to go the route of using nonbiodegradable materials like pebbles, rocks, pellets, we recommend that every time you water your container that you check to make sure water is completely draining out. If it is not, there is some type of blockage that can create the perched water table issue that contributes to root rot.

Does she have any advice on avoiding creating mosquito nurseries?

Empty all saucers filled with standing water. For self-watering pots, occasionally flush the pot out at the water port. Use natural mosquito repellent pellets with no toxic elements; read directions for use. Plant mosquito repellent plants. For more info: [12 Plants That Repel Mosquitoes | Southern Living](#)