

Growing Fruit in Containers (Published 2024_06_29)

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Many of us here in the Tri-cities area are blessed with room to grow fruit and vegetable at our homes. However, if you are short on space, don't despair. You can grow some fruits in containers. Berries, currants, and brambles are great crops to grow in pots. You can even grow apple, lime, and lemon trees in pots. See resources at the end of this article for help in selecting varieties.

Strawberries

Strawberries can grow in single containers and hanging baskets, but really shine in strawberry pots or vertical planters. Pick the best variety for your needs and set them out in late March. June-bearing plants are the ones to grow if you plan on making jams or preserves. They will produce a larger crop within a limited time frame, usually two to three weeks. Ever bearing strawberries will produce fruit twice, once in late spring and again during the fall, with smaller production of strawberries all summer long.

When choosing a container, remember that fruits need lots of water, so pick a large container with adequate drainage holes in the bottom. You will need soil with good moisture and nutrient holding capacity. The University of Massachusetts Amherst recommends two parts of commercial topsoil to one part vermiculite and one part peat.

When planting your strawberries be sure to identify 'the crown', this is the area where the root system joins the leaves and stems. It will be darker colored than the roots and contains no traces of green. You will want to bury the roots but leave the crown sitting directly on top of the soil. The strawberry plant may rot if the crown is planted too deep or dry out if too much of the crown and underlying roots are exposed. Once planted, be sure to give your pot a good soak and place in an area that receives eight or more hours of direct sun.

Plants in pots need more monitoring of moisture levels, so check regularly. Feed your strawberries a balanced fertilizer every three to four weeks. A balanced fertilizer is one where all the nutrients are in equal portions. When winter arrives, move your fruit pots into a garage or shed. They should be okay if the ambient temperature stays above 15 degrees F. You could cover them with straw and plastic to ensure they make it through the winter.

Raspberries

Raspberries, like strawberries, also come as summer fruiting or ever bearing. An ever-bearing cane or bush variety provides a fall-only harvest. Potting soil recommendations are like strawberries but should contain some slow-release fertilizer for the initial planting. Follow the directions on the fertilizer package to ensure proper usage. Fertilize bi-monthly after that with a balanced fertilizer.

Raspberries will need a three- to five-gallon pot with a support structure. The pot will need drainage holes in the bottom and consider using some pot feet to raise the container off the ground to improve drainage and air circulation. Mound some of your potting mixture into your pot and place the raspberry plant at the same depth as it was in its original container. Check the

canes on a bare root raspberry plant for where the previous soil level was before it was packaged. After planting, top off with an inch of bark mulch to keep your root system cooler in the heat. Give it a good watering and place in an area that gets at least eight hours of full sun. In late November, prune the canes back to about six inches and store them as you would your strawberry pots. The early winter pruning will prevent a fruit crop in the early summer and keep the plant at a manageable size. Surprisingly, the single crop yield can be as large as the two crop system.

Blueberries

Blueberries are fussier than the other soft fruits. There are a few self-pollinating varieties, otherwise you will need more than one variety of the same type and same bloom time for cross-pollination. The container needs to be at least 24 inches wide and 24 inches deep for a mature plant. They also need an acidic soil mix. You can easily make one by mixing two-thirds of regular potting mix to one third acidic potting mix made especially for azaleas and camellias. Blueberries typically don't need to be fertilized often. Fertilize with a blend specially made for acid loving plants after the initial planting and early in the spring.

You will need to stay on top of watering and weeding. Test the soil periodically for pH to be sure it is still acidic. You can purchase a testing kit or take a sample to your local agricultural extension office.

Blueberries are a favorite of wildlife so consider investing in netting that covers the plants and leaves the berries.

Prepare the plants for winter to protect the root system, but still allow them to go dormant. If you have planted in plastic containers store them in a shed or garage over winter. The thin plastic will not insulate a blueberries' shallow root system. Larger containers that are too heavy to move easily can be buried in leaves and mulch and then wrapped in burlap or plastic.

All soft fruits plants whether stored inside or outside, need to be checked occasionally and watered sparingly if needed. No fertilizer should be added during the winter months. If you do store in a shed or garage, place plants by a window for light. When winter is past, harden the plants off. Start with just a few hours outside daily gradually working up to permanent outdoor residence within a two-week period.

Resources

“Selecting Strawberries for Residential Production in Tennessee,”

<https://uthort.tennessee.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/228/2023/11/W895C.pdf>

“Growing Raspberries in the Home Garden,” <https://extension.umn.edu/fruit/growing-raspberries-home-garden#choosing-raspberry-plants-331662>

“Selecting Blueberries for Residential Production in Tennessee,”

<https://rutherford.tennessee.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/200/2022/05/W895A-Selecting-Blueberries-for-Residential-Production-in-TN.pdf>

“How to Grow Fruits, Vegetables, Herbs in Container Gardens,”

[https://extension.illinois.edu/sites/default/files/how to grow fruits vegetables herbs in containers.pdf](https://extension.illinois.edu/sites/default/files/how_to_grow_fruits_vegetables_herbs_in_containers.pdf)

For more information about gardening, visit UTHORT’s YouTube site for helpful videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjS3d1IkIH1OZ1Z2qPvhgfQ>

How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.