

Terrariums – The Easiest Garden You’ll Ever Have (published 2026-05-30)
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I love having plants in my house. But I have 4 cats that love to ruin my indoor plants. And I work outside on so many gardens that I prefer to keep the indoor gardening easy. The answer for me is closed terrariums. They are simple, easy to create and maintain, cat-proof, and provide year-round interest.

To create a closed terrarium, you’ll need a nice clear glass or plastic container with a cover that fits snugly. You can buy a container but there are plenty of things you can upcycle to use. For example, clear glass cookie jars or candy jars will work. Large canning jars, apothecary jars or any other covered container can work. Just make sure it is clear and has an opening large enough to reach into to plant and maintain the garden.

To decide the style of container to use, consider where you’ll keep it. If you want a terrarium as a centerpiece in your dining room, something a little fancy would be lovely. As a retired pharmacist, I like the idea of an apothecary jar for the kitchen. A cookie jar terrarium would also be fun in the kitchen.

To prepare the terrarium, be sure to keep everything clean. Because it is a closed system and will be humid, it is perfect for growing things other than your plants. Wash your hands or wear clean gloves when handling your materials. Clean the container well with hot, soapy water, rinse well and dry.

A soilless potting mix is needed along with some charcoal powder mixed in. The charcoal adds organic matter and will adsorb odors or chemicals. Organic charcoal is readily available at garden centers and online. Add enough potting mix to accommodate the largest root ball you plan to plant. Moisten the soil but avoid over wetting it. You do not need to add pebbles or rocks to the bottom of the container.

The plants that will work best in a closed terrarium are moisture-loving woodland plants or topicals. Small, slow growing plants or dwarf plants will do well. Since indoor lighting will be dimmer than outdoors, make sure your plants will thrive in low light. Moss, lichens and ferns are good choices. Depending on your taste, you can use a single plant or a mixture of plants. Resources below have lists of plants with details useful in deciding what to choose.

It is great fun to mix plants of different textures and colors. Adding some decorative stones or small items create more interest. Make a small path with pebbles. Just make sure they are clean before using. Make different levels or curves with the soil. If you decide to use several plants, choose ones with different heights. The terrarium can be whatever your imagination conjures up.

Make sure the plants you choose are healthy. Before putting plants in the container, remove any damaged or yellowed leaves. Also, pre-assemble the plants and any other items outside the container to make sure it is what you want and will fit. It is easy to overdo the number of plants.

There are some tools needed for planting and maintaining the terrarium. You can use your clean hands if you like or a long-handled kitchen spoon can be used for digging in the soil for planting or removing a plant. To tamp the soil down, try a cork attached to a skewer or chopstick. A pair of scissors or small clippers will come in handy when yellowed leaves require removal.

Once you've finalized your plans, plant away! Tidy up any soil that got on the sides of the container. A small amount of water is needed at this point. It is better to use a little water and add some later than trying to evaporate excess water. Add the cover to the container and observe to make sure condensation is present. You are setting up a rain cycle with a light fog of condensation that beads up and rolls down the inside. If there is too much water, remove the cover and let some water evaporate. During the first few weeks, disease, if present, generally appears. Remove diseased material or treat with the appropriate agent.

Maintenance of a terrarium is pretty simple. If you have a very tight-fitting lid, remove it once a week to allow fresh air in. If condensation disappears, add a little water. Water may not be needed for months if the lid is tight. Once a year in spring, a small amount of fertilizer may be added at $\frac{1}{4}$ the recommended rate. Prune out any leaves or stems that are overgrown or yellowed. Finally, keep the outside of the container clean to allow light in.

Enjoy the creativity of designing a terrarium that will provide interest in the house without a lot of work.

Resources

“Creating a Closed Terrarium,” <https://extension.psu.edu/creating-a-closed-terrarium>

“How to Design a Closed-System Terrarium,” <https://extension.msstate.edu/publications/how-design-closed-system-terrarium>

“Terrariums,” <https://extension.missouri.edu/publications/g6520>

How do I ask a question?

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