



# Growing Trees and Shrubs in Containers

Container gardening, while rewarding, can be challenging. Most plants require extra TLC when growing in containers, and still tend to be short lived. You have to consider the possibility that trees and shrubs kept in containers may need to be replaced as often as every 1-5 years. The four primary issues that you face are:

- **Constrained Roots:** Limited container size means less room for root development, and a greater chance that plants will become root bound.
- **Temperature Swings:** The limited soil mass and greater exposure of being in containers can cause drastic changes in soil temperature throughout the season, stressing your plants.
- **Moisture Loss:** Excessive heat, high wind, and limited soil mass will result in faster moisture loss for your container plants. You must water them regularly. Rainfall alone is not sufficient.
- **Poor Drainage:** Despite the need for supplemental watering, your container plants cannot be sitting in water. Make sure your containers have adequate drainage.

## Selecting Plants

When preparing to purchase plants for a container garden, check the exposure of the area where you want to put your containers. How much sun does it get? What direction does it face? It is also helpful to take pictures and measurements of the space and/or draw a diagram. Having this information will make it easier to determine which plants will work best for you, and their care requirements.

## Container Options

Gethsemane's Statuary Department carries many different kinds of containers in a variety of sizes, shapes, and materials. Resin containers are very popular because they are light weight and hold up well to weather conditions. Heavier containers can be a good choice for high rise buildings where intense winds can be problematic. When planting trees and shrubs, bigger containers are always better. The larger size allows for greater root growth, moisture retention, and insulation. Remember, plants may eventually outgrow the container. Also, make sure the containers you purchase have drainage holes. If there are no drainage holes in the container, ask if they can be drilled for you.

## Planting

When planting trees and shrubs, the root flare (the area where the roots first start to emerge from the base of the plant) should be at or slightly above the soil line. The soil line should be 2-4" below the rim of the container. Some people like to add a 1-3" layer of rock/gravel to the bottom of the container to help with drainage.

Fill about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the container with a high grade potting soil. Make a funnel in the center by pushing some of the soil up against the sides of the container. Remove the plant from the grower's pot. If the plant's roots are densely compacted, loosen up the root ball a bit. Settle the plant in the center of the container, add enough soil to cover the exposed roots, and push down firmly to secure the plant in place. Water the plant immediately after you finish planting it. While you water for the first time, watch the bottom of the container and make sure the water is draining properly.

## Watering

There is no “formula” to determine how often you need to water your container plants. Every location and container is different. Check the soil moisture every 24-48 hours by pressing your finger into the soil 2-3”. If it is dry, water the plant until the soil is fully saturated. Following this schedule for the first 4-6 weeks after planting should give you a better understanding of how often the plant needs water. Please remember that varying weather conditions will affect how often you need to water your container plants.

## Winter Maintenance

Plants are much less cold hardy when over-wintering them above ground, but there are steps you can take to protect your container plants in the cold weather. Layering insulation (such as burlap or bubble wrap) around the container can help protect the plant’s root system from extreme cold. Grouping your container plants together (with the hardiest plants on the perimeter) or up against building walls can also help protect them. Repeated temperature swings, such as freeze and thaw cycles during early spring, can “trick” your plant into budding/leafing out early. Buds and leaves are not as cold hardy as the woody parts of the plant and may be damaged by spring freezes. Most plants need very little moisture during the winter since they are dormant. Evergreens – plants that retain their leaves/needles during the winter – do need some water, since they will continue to lose moisture through their foilage. The best solution is to put ice cubes on top of the soil in the container. The ice will slowly melt during warmer daytime temperatures, providing adequate moisture. Add more ice throughout the winter as it melts.

## No Warranty

Due to the harsh growing conditions experienced by plants in above-ground planting situations, Gethsemane Garden Center does not offer any kind of warranty on trees and shrubs that are planted in containers or raised beds.