

12. Containers and Raised Beds.

Annual Schedule

Early Spring
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not allow containers to dry out. • Feed • Tidy shabby perennials • Check for pests and diseases
Late Spring
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not allow containers to dry out • Feed • Check for pests and diseases
Summer
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not allow containers to dry out. Containers may need watering more than once a day during hot weather • Feed • Deadhead for prolonged flowering • Plant up summer baskets now the risk of frost has passed • Check for pests and diseases
Autumn
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not allow containers to dry out. • Deadhead • Check for pests and diseases • Plant up containers with winter bedding
Winter
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not allow containers to dry out.

Further Information

General Routine Care of Containers

Plants in containers need regular maintenance to keep them healthy and looking good.

- **Watering**

Unlike plants grown in the ground, plants in containers have very limited water reserves. It is essential that the compost is kept moist. Even after rainfall, plants may still need watering, as the rain may have been diverted away from the soil via plant foliage. Pots and baskets fixed against walls are particularly vulnerable to drying out, as they are often sheltered from the rain. During very hot and dry weather plants may need watering twice or even three times a day. The simplest way to check if a container needs watering is to insert a **finger into the compost**. Check it is moist below the surface.

During warmer weather the ideal time to water containers is in the morning, as little is lost to evaporation. Take care to direct the water to the soil rather than the foliage.

Hanging baskets above head level may be easier to reach using a rigid hose lance attachment.

Plants can die through **overwatering** too so do not water if the compost is moist beneath the surface.

- **Compost and Feeding.**

There are two basic types of potting compost available for container gardening: soil or loam-based compost and soil-less or multi-purpose compost. Specialist compost is also available for bulbs and ericaceous (acid-loving) plants.

A soil or loam-based compost containing slow-release fertilisers will support plants for many seasons. It contains loam, peat (or a peat substitute) and sand. It retains water well, re-wets if dries out, but doesn't get waterlogged. It is also heavier, so gives stability to a container, although the weight makes it unsuitable for hanging baskets. A soil or loam-based compost is suitable for displays lasting several seasons such as those containing shrubs, climbers, trees, roses, fruit, herbs and hardy perennials.

Soil or loam-based composts are available in 3 grades defined by John Innes Horticultural Institute:

- **John Innes No 1.** Contains relatively little fertiliser and is ideal for growing seedlings and rooted cuttings as well as slow-growing plants such as alpines.
- **John Innes No 2.** Contains double the nutrients of No 1 and is suitable for plants with an average nutrient requirement.
- **John Innes No 3.** Contains three times the fertiliser of No 1 and is suitable for vigorous plants and those that will be in a container for longer than one season.

Soil-less or multi-purpose compost is clean to handle. It is also lighter in weight so good for hanging baskets and balcony containers and it holds water well, which is especially useful for small containers that dry out quickly. On the downside, it is difficult to re-wet once it has dried out and nutrient levels decline very quickly, as they are easily leached out by watering.

Multipurpose compost is generally suitable for short-term displays including bedding and small, fast-growing crops.

Plants will benefit from extra feeding during the growing season between March and September

- **Pests and Diseases**

Regularly check containers for signs of pests and diseases, as the sooner they are detected the easier it is to deal with them. Prevention is always better than cure. Adhere to basic hygiene rules and keep the general area clean of debris such as fallen leaves that attract and harbour undesirables, notably slugs and snails. Regularly provide container plants with water and nutrients to promote strong growth as healthy, sturdy plants will be far more resistant to the threat of pests and diseases than weaker plants.

Planting and Maintaining a Hanging Basket

Ensure hanging baskets are fixed securely to the wall by using strong wall-mounted brackets, wall plugs and galvanised screws. Bear in mind hanging baskets can be heavy, particularly as they should be kept moist at all times.

Nearly all hanging baskets have a lightweight, open construction and use liners. Many materials can be used as a basket lining, including pre-formed shells, moss, wool, foam and straw. Recycled materials from the garden, such as dead grass and fern fronds, are also suitable. Highly absorbent liners should have an inner lining of sheet plastic (with a few added drainage holes) to aid water retention.



Some baskets have solid sides and have a built-in reservoir that helps to keep the compost moist.

Use lightweight, soilless compost with plenty of controlled-release fertiliser and water-retentive crystals. Thoroughly soak the plants before planting and fill around each plant with compost to eradicate any air pockets.

In spring, tidy overwintering plants and remove frost-damaged and ragged leaves. During the growing season shorten any weak, straggly stems to encourage bushy growth and deadhead regularly to prevent seeding and fruiting, and encourage more flowers instead.