

Columns

By Marjie Scharff

From My Garden to Yours

Spring is coming any day now. I can't wait to pack all the color I can into every bit of my visual space as soon as I am able! No matter where you live, in the desert or by the sea, in a high rise apartment or a RV, you can add colorful blooms in a very easy way. All you need is to look "up" to the possibilities. Hang greenery and blossoms high in customized hanging baskets.

Hanging baskets can be grown much more easily today due to the large array of containers with their own saucers to catch drips, and also wonderful new soil polymers that hold 200 times their weight in water, and release it to the roots slowly. This cuts watering time, and keeps the plants a lot less thirsty..

Many attractive wall brackets are available, as well as swivel hooks that let you turn your baskets daily to grow evenly. Pulleys that can be suspended on a bracket or a wall beam make watering a cinch. Just lower baskets to a convenient height, and raise them easily when finished watering..

Do you like butterflies? You can plant a special basket to attract them. They like sweet alyssum (white), pineapple sage (deep pink), ageratum (blue), nasturtium (orange and gold), petunias (all colors), trailing lantana (New Gold is yellow and Montevideo is lavender), and a favorite is asclepias tuberosa which is also known as "butterfly weed" (Cinderella asclepias is pink and the best known one is deep red and gold). You can plant only one of the above plants, or make a mixture. All of them trail except the asclepias. You could plant it in the center and surround it with the nasturtiums, which do have beautiful foliage, as well as the hot colors. Purple Wave petunias trail beautifully, and would combine well with alyssum..

How would you like a compact vegetable garden to harvest? Grow these where they will have enough sun to ripen. In a 12 to 14 inch wide container place Ruby Red chard in the center with Tom Thumb cherry tomatoes, chives and Caraway thyme or parsley. Check the seed catalogues for miniature vegetable varieties and give it a try..

It might be fun to grow miniature cucumbers in a basket. The usual variety grows so quickly that you can hardly keep them picked. In a shadier spot you could grow a salad basket with a variety of lettuces, and maybe a few herbs tucked in to trail down. I think the purple basil would look great with the lime green lettuce leaves, and maybe some purple-red arugula. I will include more specific growing instructions at the end of this column..

People that enjoy the pleasure of touching leaves that release fragrance can try planting one of the scented leaf geraniums (really pelargoniums) such as coconut, apple (smells like juicy fruit gum to me), Limoneum (lemon-lime fragrance), Lady Mary (lemon and rose combined) or nutmeg. You could

include a scented thyme in the planting. They have such tiny wee leaves and flowers and would mix well. I personally have tried coconut, caraway, and lemon, but there are many other varieties to grow. Of course, an additional benefit is all the things you can do with the leaves-- add them to pound cake as it bakes, make a delicate jelly, or mix an aromatic potpourri..

If you consider yourself a beginner at growing plants and are a little timid about trying, the following are recommended to boost your confidence and give you the pleasure of growing a hanging basket:.

- philodendron cordatum - dark green heart shaped leaves, grows in low light and adapts to very little water..
- sword fern (nephrolepis) - prefers bright light and rich humusy soil but will take a lot of neglect..
- wandering jew (tradescantia) - will grow in almost any situation in whatever soil it is given. Its leaves may be purple, striped, furry, tiny green or medium green with purple edging. It prefers bright shade or dappled sunlight, and evenly moist soil..
- spider plant (chlorophytum) - these can hardly be killed and produce little parachutes that hang down from the mother plant in a most attractive way. They are supposed to be effective in removing air pollution in a room. Ideally, they like bright light and lots of water in the summer, but very little the rest of the year..

Growing Instructions For a Wire Basket

Soak sphagnum moss in a sink or bucket full of water until it swells up and becomes pliable. Line a wire basket from the bottom and up the sides to the top. Add a plastic liner (can be a garbage bag cut to fit) and poke small pinholes in it for drainage..

Soil

Method 1

Fill with commercial potting soil. Do not use dirt from your yard. Add a time-release fertilizer such as Osmocote according to directions on container. Wet soil before adding to lined basket..

Method 2

Fill with one half commercial potting soil and one half vermiculite. Vermiculite absorbs up to four times its volume in water and helps keep from drying out. Add a time-release fertilizer. Wet soil and vermiculite mix before adding to lined basket..

Method 3

Mix five parts of commercial potting soil to one part **ISOLITE CG** (a porous ceramic that decreases soil compaction, increases water retention, and favorably affects oxygen levels of the soil). Add a time-release fertilizer. Water in after adding dry mixture to basket. For more information about ISOLITE CG: <http://www.sundineenterprises.com>

Planting

Remember that the smaller the plants you buy are, the longer it will take them to grow into a full, luxurious planting. Plant from the bottom up if using a wire basket by poking holes through the sphagnum moss and inserting plants root first into the soil. You can wrap the leaves in wax paper if they are brittle to help guide them into the hole. You can always plant in the usual way at the top, but adding small plants around the bottom makes a very pretty mature basket, and remember that as the plants grow they will be consuming more and more water, so be vigilant..

If you are growing vegetables, you will need to also use a water soluble fertilizer weekly. If you do not choose to use this in connection with the Osmocote, you will need to increase the liquid fertilizing accordingly. Never fertilize in full sunlight or the leaves may burn. If the soil is totally dry, water first before fertilizing..

Plants for a Sunny Location

- Trailing lantana
- purslane
- portulaca
- bougainvillea
- pineapple sage
- burro tail sedum
- star-flowering cactus (stapelia)
- hen and chickens (escheverria)
- Swan River daisy
- petunia
- hyme
- nasturtium

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