

Tom's Garden Blog

Summer 2023

Growing Tomatoes in Pots

You don't need a garden to enjoy wonderful home-grown tomatoes. If you have a balcony, patio, or live in a condo, you can still have a garden. Substitute peppers, bush beans, or flowers for the tomatoes.

Tomatoes are my favorite for growing in pots or hanging baskets.

One extra benefit from growing in containers is better resistance to pests, weeds, and diseases that live in the soil since you will be using fresh, sterile potting soil. You also won't likely have rabbit and deer problems, especially on a deck or patio.

You can grow beautiful plants without a garden. Some requirements; choose a spot that gets full sun, at least 8 to 10 hours, more is better. Choose the right plants. Plants labeled bush, patio, compact, or dwarf are usually the best for container gardening. These usually grow no more than 3 to 4 feet tall and set blossoms early. You still may need a short stake for tomatoes if there is a heavy yield.

Also, choose vegetable plants with a short growing season for northern climates. Hopefully your plants have been re-potted at least once to develop a large root system (this is important.) Choose stalky plants with thick heavy stems.



Tomato with Thai basil. Tomatoes love basil! Don't be stingy with the pot size, bigger is better. A 16-inch container is just right for one tomato plant. This will give plenty of room for roots and the soil won't dry out quickly. Be sure there is a drainage hole in the pot. You can go a little smaller for a hanging basket with cherry tomatoes. Fabric pots are fine and a good choice but dry out faster. You can cover the soil around the plant with mulch, fabric, or straw, and raise the pots up off the deck or concrete to help with drainage. Use a saucer if the moisture will damage the deck or stain the concrete.



Dahlias in a pot

Don't use topsoil or bagged raised bed soil, it is too dense. Use a high quality premium mix, it's ok to use one with moisture control beads. There is no need to put stones in the bottom of the pot. Use a piece of window screen if your drain holes are large and will leak out soil. It's the quality of the potting soil that will help with drainage, and not stones or gravel.

As you add soil to the pot, sprinkle in some fertilizer formulated for whatever you are growing. Too much nitrogen will give you lots of foliage and little fruits or flowers.



Succulents and cacti along a deck rarely need watering.

Getting Rid of Aphids

Aphids can be a real problem in the garden world, but you can keep them under control with natural methods.

Of all the pests that invade gardens throughout the season, aphids are one of the most destructive insects.

AKA plant lice, garden lice, or greenflies, aphids multiply seemingly overnight and can invade a garden leaving your plants struggling.

Aphids aren't picky about what they feed on, including houseplants, ornamentals and edible plants.

Aphids showing up are actually a warning sign that plants are under some sort of stress such as drought or heat stress, overwatering, or over fertilizing (Miracle Gro.)

Aphids can be managed if caught early, before the colony gets too large and begins to spread.



Canna lilies in a pot

One nice thing about growing in pots is that you can move them around to suit your decorating ideas.

Bury the stem of a tomato plant deeply as new roots will develop along the stem.

Pinch off the bottom leaves if necessary.

Water the plant well, several times until water runs out of the bottom drainage holes. Top off the soil if it has settled. After a few days, check the soil with your finger and if it feels dry, water again. Remember, plants in containers dry out quickly.

A female aphid can produce 40 generations (about 500 billion aphids) in one season. That's why it is important to take care of the problem early or not let it happen at all. Aphids are tiny, soft-bodied, sap-sucking insects ranging from 1/16 to ¼ inch long with pear shaped bodies in varying colors. Green aphids tend to blend in with the stems and leaves and go unnoticed for a long period of time. Other common aphid colors are yellow, gray, red, brown, and black.



When aphids become overcrowded, they develop wings and fly to other plants in the nearby area.



Although seemingly insignificant compared to, say, a Japanese beetle, they thrive by sheer numbers and multiply rapidly. They can overrun a plant before you know they are there if you don't pay attention. Especially this late spring, plants are stressed because of our unusual drought conditions.

Each generation lives for 20 to 40 days and just keeps on multiplying.

Aphids will remain on a host plant until the infested plant withers up and dies. They don't eat the plant but rather suck the plant juices out of stems and leaves. That is why a "trap crop" works well in some cases.

Keeping aphids off your plants in the first place is the best option, without using chemicals. The most important part of getting rid of aphids is to catch them early.

Aphids like to hide on the underside of leaves and deep inside stems like broccoli. Make it a habit to inspect plants regularly, especially on new growth. Over fertilizing with high nitrogen fertilizers (Miracle Gro) causes a flush of tender new growth that aphids love. An organic slow-release fertilizer or Osmocote is much better. Plants are prone to stress during periods of drought which makes them prime targets for aphid infestation. Try not to underwater or overwater plants.

Aphids have natural predators such as ladybugs and parasitic wasps that consume aphids. You can leave a few aphids on select plants, especially on trap plants to attract these beneficial insects.

Beneficial umbrel flowers like dill, Queen Anne's lace, and cosmos will attract beneficial insects.

Aphids hate strong smelling plants like marigold, catnip, and mountain mint, so they make good companion plants. Herbs like fennel, cilantro, chives, and any of the mint family will repel aphids.

Trap crops are a useful deterrent for the plants you want to protect. Plant the trap crops among or around the outside of your bed to catch aphids when they first show up. A few ideas for trap crops include nasturtium, calendula, and nettles. Once these sacrificial plants are well infested, burn or throw them in the trash, not the compost pile.

Of all the methods for getting rid of aphids quickly, a simple spray of water from your garden hose will knock them off and they won't be able to crawl back onto your plants. The water will also wash off some of the "honeydew" secretions off the plants and keep ants from returning. Repeat every few days until the aphids are gone.

If you can't spray tender plants with the garden hose, treat them with an insecticidal soap spray. This also works for indoor plants. Just spray the infected area and not the whole plant.