



Container Gardening - Finding the Right Soil

By Tammy Borden ©

There are many ways in which we display our plants: indoors, outdoors, in pots, hanging baskets, and many more. Depending on your situation, there are different considerations when choosing the soil or growing medium you will use. Below are some basic rules of thumb.

Starting Seeds

Use a sterile soil-less seed starting mix. One brand name example is Jiffy Mix. However, there are others available. In fact, I used Fafard Super Fine brand mix this year and absolutely loved it. As its name suggested, it was super fine without clumps or filler. I tried Schultz brand seed starting mix and found that it was too lumpy and my finer seeds like impatiens and nicotiana had a hard time germinating in it.

Outdoor Potted Plants/Hanging Baskets

Once your plants have germinated in your seed starting mix and have a couple true leaves you can transplant them into a container with potting mix. Do not use straight seed starting mix for your transplants because it has very little nutrient value, and as your plants grow they need nourishment. Also, do not use regular garden soil. It is too dense and can smother your seedlings, plus it may contain weed seeds and unwanted disease and pests.

A proper soil mixture is important for potted plants because the roots are restricted by the pot and not free to spread. It's important to find the balance between good moisture retention and good drainage. There are standard potting mixes available at garden centers, or some potting mixes come with fertilizers already in them. One common brand is Miracle Grow. However, there are generic brands available as well. If you prefer not to spend the extra money for the fertilizer type, you can mix in about 1/4 – 1/3 compost and peat moss into your mixture for an added boost. Or you can add in your own time-release fertilizer. A little sand or perlite added to the soil will also improve aeration and drainage.

There are some potting mixes that tout "moisture control" as a feature. I personally do not like them. All they've really done to attain this is add more filler like wood chips, then charge you more money for it! If I am concerned about keeping my outdoor potted plants from drying out, I use a product called Soil Moist and mix it in the soil. It is a granular moisture absorbing product that has worked great for me. It is especially useful in hanging baskets which seem to dry out quickly. I have even used it directly in the garden bed around those plants that prefer wet feet. It's important to not use more than the recommended amount or you may actually drown your plants.

Indoor Potted Plants

Much of the same directions apply to indoor potted plants as outdoor potted plants. However, there are some things to avoid. Do not use compost or manure in your indoor pots. The reasons may seem obvious, but in addition to the potential odor, you may be introducing unwanted disease and pests into your home. Also, since your indoor environment is a controlled atmosphere, elements like wind, rain and fluctuating temperatures are not a factor. So, the use of moisture retentive products is unnecessary. Even more crucial than with outdoor plants, always use a container with a drainage hole in the bottom to avoid root rot and disease. To avoid disease and pests, you can sterilize your growing mix in an oven at 400 degrees for an hour. This kills most bacteria, larvae, weed seeds and insect eggs.

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Cactus Mixes

Cacti require much more drainage and aeration than regular house plants, and prefer an alkaline soil. You can purchase a pre-packaged potting mix especially formulated for cactus. However, if you want to concoct your own mixture, try the following simple recipe: Equal parts commercial potting soil and builders sand. You can add a tablespoon of lime to a gallon mixture of this as well. They prefer an alkaline soil. Cacti prefer to be in unglazed clay pots with a layer of coarse gravel and charcoal in the bottom. Most Cacti have far ranging lateral roots so a shallow, wide clay pot is preferred. Put a thick layer of crushed gravel on the top of the soil surface to help stabilize the plant as well.

Keep these tips in mind for the next time you're transplanting your favorite plants. Give them the right conditions and they'll thrive!