

# LOW-MAINTENANCE CONTAINER BASICS

by Rosalind Reed

Some might say that “low-maintenance container planting” is an oxymoron of the same order as “obedient cats.” However, after almost 20 years of container gardening in Chicago, I rely upon a few fundamentals to increase my probability of success and to minimize my work.

The first requirement for container gardening is to be realistic, and to accept the vicissitudes of most Chicago summers. There are three contingencies to plan for. A cool, damp June and less than perfect drainage can result in rotten roots or fungal disease. On the other hand, weeks of hot, dry, windy days may require constant watering. Then, of course, there is life: travel, business, laziness. Neglect can be the kiss of death to a container planting. With those caveats in mind, here are my guidelines for achieving great looks with the least maintenance:

**THINK BIG:** This is the most important strategy. Use big containers: at least 12”x12”x12” and preferably 18”-30” in size. Window boxes must be at least 8” wide and 10” deep. More soil equals cooler roots and less watering. Additionally, “thinking big” means “more bang for the buck.” Why go to all the work for a piddly little container when you could have a bold display for the same amount of effort?

**ASSESS THE SITE:** Accept the realities of where the container is to be sited. The most challenging site faces west, where prevailing winds can blow unceasingly from mid-May through June (the plant’s prime growing season). Hot afternoon sun can stress some plants to death. An east-facing site is prime—less wind, cool morning sun, and protection from after-

noon heat. With enough water, a south direction provides the best opportunity for growing the largest variety of plants, as the sun rises in the southeast and sets in the southwest. North-facing sites tend to be cool and shady, with the potential to be terminally damp. Hanging baskets are the most difficult containers to maintain since they dry out so quickly, and I find it impossible to grow a “low maintenance” hanging basket in a western exposure.

**COMMIT TO WATERING:** The optimal watering system is drip irrigation, especially on decks, pools, and other hot and windy sites. These systems are easy to install, with an automatic timer, 1/2” flexible hose around the perimeter of the

group of pots, and 1/4” flexible tubes with emitters connecting from the hose into each pot. [Look for “Raindrip” systems.] The secret is short-watering periods (just enough to soak the soil) early in the morning. A second watering is often necessary late in the afternoon on hot, windy days. Too much water at one time washes away the soil’s nutrients. I don’t use saucers under the containers because when we have a rainy, cool spell the plants often sit in water and the roots rot.

**CHANGE THE SOIL:** I put new soil in each pot each year, although I may not do more than stir up the soil in the very bottom of a huge pot if it will be planted with shallow-rooted annuals. I use soil mixes formulated for containers. Frankly, I don’t see much distinction among different mixes, so I use what’s easily available. I do avoid using mixes which need pre-wetting before they can absorb water, and I’m very cautious about adding peat moss to an improvised mix of potting soil and composted cow manure. Should the pre-wetted or overly-peat-mossed mix ever dry out, the plants will be encased in a sawdust-like brick, and death will be swift. Adding polymer gel to soil mixes to retain water can really aid in drowning a plant if the weather is damp and cool.

**FERTILIZE REGULARLY:** To keep my containers lush, I fertilize regularly. I’m a “Miracle-Gro” fan, and I apply it two weeks after the plants are first installed, or when they have begun to grow because the weather has warmed, then every two weeks thereafter until we’re hit with a blistering hot spell. I withhold fertilizer during heat waves, then resume fertilization on a bi-weekly schedule until mid-September. Often I will apply a



product called “Spray-N-Gro” (micronutrients diluted in warm water) or, as my husband calls it, “Steroids for Plants.” The containers will look like they’ve been to a health spa: vigorous, refreshed, full of bloom. In my experience, this supplement is best applied 4-5 days after fertilization, and there is negligible effect if applied more often than monthly.

**DEAD HEAD:** Think like a botanist! The sole life force of an annual plant is to set seed for future plants. After that, it’s ready for the compost pile. To trick the plant into producing more flowers, you must deadhead spent flowers regularly. I’m particularly aggressive about this ritual if there is a heat wave descending, as the plant, sensing possible death by drought, goes into double-time to produce seed. Accompanied by music and beverage, deadheading can be a most pleasant task, although a little more like work if you have to stoop.

**MAKE CREATIVE COMPOSITIONS:** I arrange the plants in my containers to include tall things, mounding stuff, and droopers (technical term). If the containers are going to be seen up close, I add a fourth category of “cute little stuff.” I think containers look too anal-compulsive when the tall plant is in the middle, surrounded by a ring of little things, so with me the tall plant goes off-center near the back, then in come the mounders and droopers. My window boxes follow the same tall/mound/droop scheme. I especially like to use plants on standards, such as Roses, Hibiscus, and Lantana, so that we get serious about height. I arrange containers in groups of different sizes, so a bigger mass is created. The most luxurious look is created by a riot-of-color approach, and I prefer to use all bold colors or all pastels. Mixing bold and pastel looks splotchy, especially when whites and pale pinks are com-

peting with bright yellows and reds. I use a lot of colored foliage plants, which are usually super low-maintenance, and add contrast all their own.

**REPEAT THIS PROCESS ANNUALLY:** Many people ask me if their container plants can winter over. The short answer is “no.” Between white fly and plant exhaustion from struggling to produce seed, you will have abandoned the idea of low-maintenance. [This response reflects my interest in indoor houseplants, which is limited to Christmas tree, amaryllis, and paperwhites.] However, some perennials and shrubs will over-winter in containers if they have good drainage and are protected from drying winds. I’ve found that Artemisia, Chives, Gypsophila, Platycodon, Pansies, Sedum, Tarragon, and Junipers are pretty indestructible.

**CHOOSE LOW MAINTENANCE PLANTS:** By mixing some super-low maintenance plants among the reliable performers which need lots of care or perfect weather to look their best, here are some of my preferred plants:

**All-Round Toughest Plant:** Asparagus Fern for shade, sun, wind, dry, damp. If you do neglect it, it turns a nice gold color, for an early touch of fall. Hanging baskets of ‘Babies Tears’ [*Soleirolia*] purchased as cheaply as possible from garden centers are also almost indestructible when transplanted into a container in part-sun to shady conditions. [*TWG Editor:* Baby’s Tears are indeed tough, a character trait well implied by their other common names: ‘Mind Your Own Business’ or ‘Corsican Curse’.]

**Tolerates Most Neglect in Shade:** Bromeliads.

**Best Plants Tolerating Most Neglect in Morning Sun/Part Shade Situations:** Tuberous or non-stop

Begonias; Geraniums; Agapanthus (6 weeks of bloom and nice foliage thereafter); Fuschia; Coleus; and Penta.

**Plants for Biggest Impact in Sunny, Moderately Windy Sites (Moderate Neglect):** Ornamental grasses (3-5 gallon size); Hibiscus on standards; Echevaria; Yucca; Cannas; most Hybrid Tea Roses.

**Least Fuss, Vertical Accents in Sunny Window Boxes:** Chives (plant regular and Garlic chives together); Geraniums in 6” pots; Lavender; 1-gallon dwarf Colorado Spruce.

**Least Fuss, Mounding Plants For Sunny Sites:** Dahlberg Daisy; Dwarf marigolds; Artemisia ‘Silver Mound’; Ageratum; Coreopsis ‘Moonbeam’; and Swan River Daisy (which tolerates quite a bit of shade).

**No-Fuss Droopers:** ‘Blue Rug’ and similar varieties of Junipers; Scaveola; Ivy-leafed Geranium; Licorice Plant [*Helichrysum*]; and Nasturtium. All of these tolerate full sun or afternoon shade.

**Favorite Plant to Tuck Into Pots:** Blue Pansies, which enjoy early planting. The blue varieties seem most tolerant of summer heat, and, if cut back in the heat, are not missed while everything else is lush. They’ll come back into their own as the weather cools.



**Rosalind Reed** is a landscape designer based in Oak Park, IL. You may contact her at (708) 524-3323 or at [rosalindreed@worldnet.att.net](mailto:rosalindreed@worldnet.att.net). She would love to hear about your favorite plants for use in containers, and she promises to share the information in future issues of *TWG*.