

Container gardening:

by Rosemarie Rossetti, Ph.D.

Want to add pizzazz to the view outside your windows? Gardening in containers allows people who cannot stand or walk to enjoy gardening from a seated position as well as creates a colorful complement to your landscape.

Think about adding plants to your deck, patio, porch, rooftop, courtyard, front walk, and staircase landings. For a close-up view, attach a window box to a window or railing.

The atmosphere of your outdoor living space can be transformed by colorful flowering plants. Containers can be moved throughout the season, offering variety as the days pass. Place dollies under heavy pots to make them easier to slide around. For diversity, plants can be changed out with the new season.

Container Basics

Choose containers large enough to hold the roots of your favorite small trees, shrubs, herbs, vegetables and flowers. Buy containers with 10" or larger diameters to hold massive displays of color. This also helps ensure that water is available to the plants.

For wheelchair users and seated gardeners, select containers that are 24" tall. You can buy containers made of clay, concrete, plastic or wood. Clay pots are not frost proof and must be moved to a protected area, like a garage, if the winter temperatures dip below freezing. Plastic pots will last longer if they are made with ultraviolet inhibitors. Chimney flue tiles and drainage pipes made of fired clay and whiskey barrels also make great containers for the accessible garden. Make sure there are holes in the bottom of the containers to allow water to drain.



A universal design approach

Plant Selection

Small trees, shrubs, bulbs, annuals, perennials, vegetables and herbs adapt to container gardening. Plants can be evergreen or lose their leaves in the winter. Some plants will survive year after year, while others are not hardy

in the winter months. Depending on the hardiness of plants, some should be planted after the frost free date in your area.

If you want to add plants with height to your deck or patio, plant a small tree. Japanese maple, Chinese

fan palm, hibiscus, dwarf Norway spruce and date palm are suitable for containers. For a bushy shrub, consider a Japanese snowball viburnum, rose, potentilla, dwarf juniper or yew, camellia, azalea or rhododendron.

Want to grow vegetables and herbs that you can pick right off your deck? Try tomatoes, peppers, zucchini, broccoli, beans, lettuce, peas, spinach, parsley, dill, basil and chives. Some plants that vine will need to be staked or grown in a wire cage for support. Look for varieties that produce smaller plants. These are better suited for containers.

Vegetable and herb plants need a sunny location. The west and south sides of your house will be the sunniest. There are flowering plants that grow best in sun while others flourish in shade. Use references and read the plant tags as you make your selections. Do not mix plants in your container that are not compatible based on sun tolerance.

Plants that flower all summer in a sunny location are geranium, petunia, salvia, zinnia, poppy, daisy, snapdragon, coreopsis, moss rose, marigold and verbena. For flowering plants that are not as sun tolerant and do best in the shade, consider calla lily, begonia, impatiens, fuchsia, delphinium, annual phlox, lobelia, nasturtiums, sweet alyssum, and bleeding heart.

Want flowers in early spring? Plant

tulip, hyacinth, crocus, anemone, daffodil and grape hyacinth bulbs in the fall.

Summer flowering bulbs are also worth a try. Plant canna, dahlia, gladiolus, lily and iris in early spring. These do well mixed with annual and perennial flowers.

For sensational fragrance, try blooming plants like gardenia, jasmine and rose. Some plants such as sage, rosemary, mint, scented geranium and lavender have scented leaves that give off fragrance when you rub them.

You can mix or match colors in containers. Using one species in one color, red impatiens, can be dramatic. Combinations of two or three complementary colors in a single container can also be awesome.

In addition to flower color, mix plants in a container based on plant heights, leaf texture and leaf color. Ornamental grasses and draceana spikes provide height and narrow leaves. Coleus and dusty miller have colorful leaves. An ivy leaf geranium, English ivy and asparagus fern can cascade over the container's rim for a soft effect.

Planting and Caring

When planting your containers, select a bagged premium potting medium that contains sphagnum peat moss and wetting agents. Also add water retaining/absorbing products in

order to ensure that the potting medium holds water for the roots.

To aid moisture retention, add 1-2" of mulch to the surface of your soil. There are many products like pine and hardwood barks that work well.

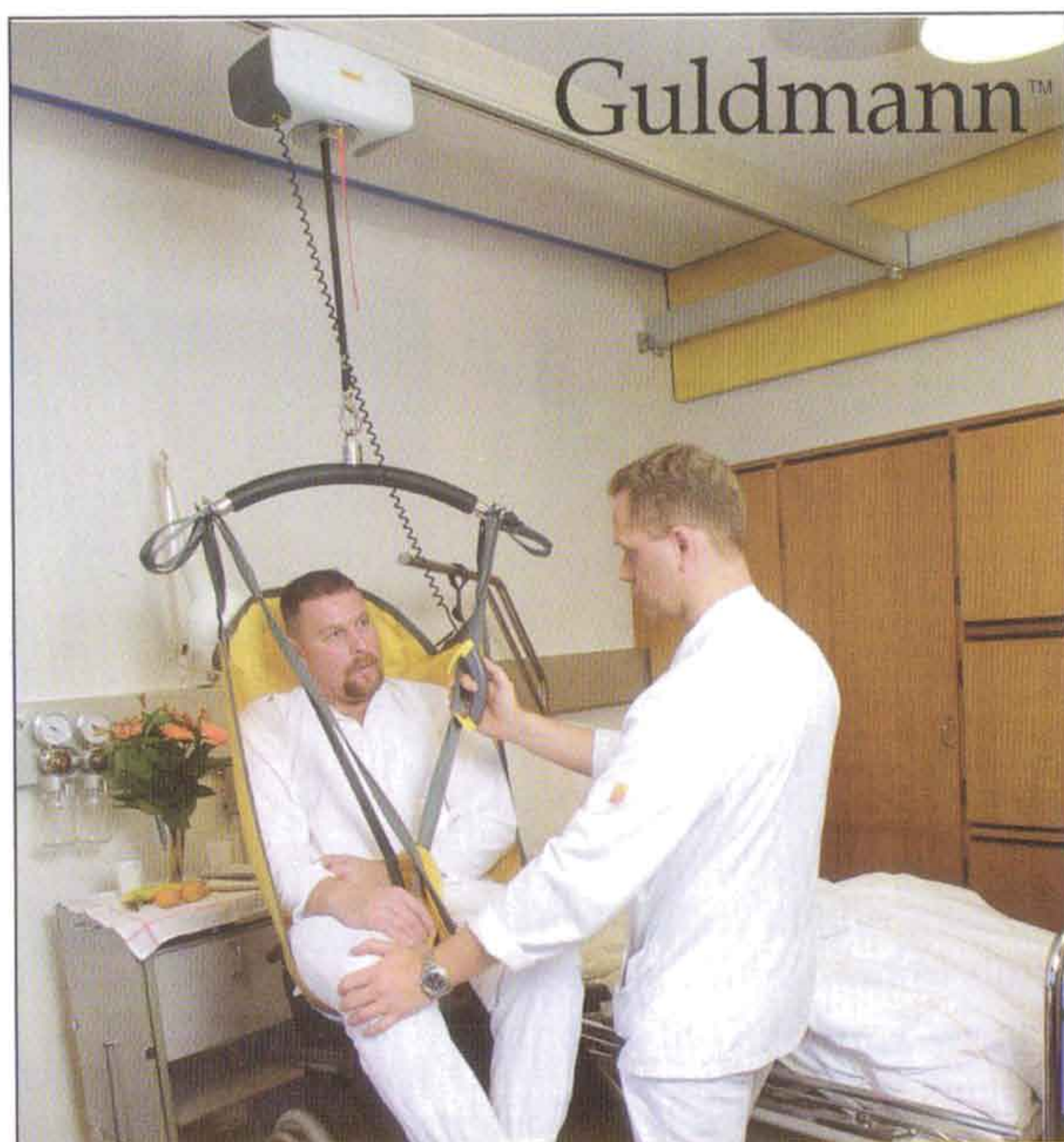
For the continued health and growth of your container plants, monitor the moisture level on a daily basis. Don't wait until your plants are wilting to water them. Warm temperatures and breezes cause plants to dry. Hanging baskets dry out especially fast.

Watering is the most important factor for successful container gardening. Water thoroughly, saturating the soil until you see water coming out of the drainage holes in the bottom of the containers.

A few weeks after planting, depending on the potting medium, you might need to add fertilizer to the container. Plastic-coated slow-release fertilizer beads like Osmocote can be sprinkled on the surface of the soil. The fertilizer will be released slowly for several months. However, many gardeners prefer to fertilize as

they water. Follow the application instructions on the label.

Container gardening is very easy and rather care-free. Plants can be viewed from your windows or from your outdoor decks and patios. By selecting plants that are suited to the environment and starting them off in a premium potting media, you can enjoy months of living color and a bountiful harvest. *



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