KINGMAN IS GROWING! Column

Bad soil got you down?
*Linda Reddick*, Kingman Area Master Gardener

Container gardening is only limited by your imagination. You can plant anything in the right container, flowers, herbs, vegetables, shrubs, and even fruit trees. Just imagine stepping out your door and picking that succulent tomato from your patio or entryway. Why stop, take a stroll thru your yard and pick a cucumber here, a watermelon there, while your nose catches a sent of sage and you eyes focus in on the colorful flowers which seem to pop up from every nook and cranny.

There are many advantages of growing in containers. The most obvious is soil. No need to hassle those rocks, caliche, sand, and just plane poor dirt. Use containers to create a focal point in your landscape, or to create that welcome feeling in your entryway, by adding color and character. They are flexible, handicapped accessible, save on your back and knees, can be eatable, and just plain fun to plant.

What defines a container? Anything that will hold soil and you can put a hole in the bottom of. For example, an old bucket or watering can, a galvanized bathtub or five-gallon nursery pot, even the three pound coffee can. If you are fortunate to have pots setting around, put them to use. Plastic deteriorates in the sun so double pot plastic containers. Double potting means putting the plastic container inside a larger container to keep surface from being exposed to the sun, leave a 1/2 inch space between the containers to allow for air circulation. Terracotta pots dry out quickly, be sure to submerge and soak them thoroughly before potting. Again it is a good idea to double pot terracotta pots because they do dry out quickly.

Treated wood may have toxic residue, i.e. railroad ties, and untreated wood may warp. Solutions, line wood containers with five-mil plastic; remember to put holes in the plastic too. Avoid containers with narrow
openings, as they are hard to water and leave a narrow space for your plants to grow. Light colored containers lessen the heat content retained by the soil. You don’t like hot feet and plants don’t like hot roots. Always be sure to place containers where they can drain. Plants don’t like soggy roots either. All containers need at least one \( \frac{1}{2} \)” hole or holes depending on the size of the container. A six-inch pot only needs one hole; a 12” should have two. Every time you double the size of the container add a hole. I highly recommend that you wash all containers with a solution of one part bleach to 10 parts water before use. This is a simple preventative measure to destroy any bacteria that the container has been harboring.

Of course you could always make raised beds. The ideal raised bed is three to four feet wide and eight to 12 inches deep. The length depends on the space you have available. Placing of raised bed may be a challenge, or an accessory to your landscape. Raised beds need to be level to avoid over watering or under watering one end or the other. Block walls conduct heat and cold. Therefore, try to avoid placing raised beds next to a block wall. However, raised bed may create a depth allusion or arouse curiosity as to what is around that corner. With the proper plant selections they can also become a screen or fill a void space.

Now that you have chosen a container or containers the next step would be the potting soils. Most of the local gardening shops have a variety of potting mixtures. I personally cannot recommend one brand over another, however I would recommend adding polymers, like Perlite to help retain moisture. Or you could be one of those lucky people who have their own compost bill. Before you fill your container cover your holes with a small rock, a piece of screen, cardboard or newspaper. This keeps the soil from draining out. The cardboard and newspaper will deteriorate after your plants are established, and the rock and screen are easily removed when you are finished with the container.

Its planting time, most small herbs, like Basel, Sweet Marjoram, Oregano, Rosemary and Thyme may be grown in six inch pots. Tomatoes, Cabbage and larger vegetables need at least a five-gallon container. Seed packages and catalogs identify vegetables that can be grown in containers; mainly they are bush varieties. Yes there are bush watermelons, cantaloupe and cucumbers. Read seed packages front and back, you will find them loaded with useful planting information. If the only containers available to you are small, try smaller vegetables
like radishes, and lettuce. If you have some very large containers like half barrels try shrubs or an apple or peach tree that has been propagated to be grown in a container. The list of flowers that do well in container is almost endless. The rule of thumb is the larger the plant, the larger the container needed. The depth of the container is more important that the width. For example, carrots would need a much deeper container than radishes.

Watering and fertilizing are the only tricks to container gardening. A drip watering system is ideal, but for many of us not practical. Vegetables, fruits and flowers loose moisture faster planted in containers than they do planted in the soil. Therefore containers require more frequent watering. This frequent watering causes loss of important nutrients from the potting mixture, so the use of a liquid fertilizer every two-week is recommended. When using any fertilizer, read the entire label and follow the manufactures directions. Never use water that has been processed thru a water softener. It is very high in sodium (salt). Always water your plants from the bottom, most of the local water contains sodium and calcium that can build up on the leaves and inhibit your plants breathing. Just like people, they can’t thrive if they can’t breath

Container planting can be fun and easy as long as you plan ahead. Allocate the space to be used. Gather the containers you would like to plant in, and research the needs of the plants you are considering planting, such as size and sun requirements. With the intense Arizona sun, most plants seem to do better with morning sun. Many of them do not need sun all day. Keep in mind the smaller plants can always be shaded by the larger plants. Choose vegetables, flowers, shrubs and trees that you will enjoy either for their simple beauty or for that savory dish on your table. From one hand full of dirt to another!

For more information on soils and gardening contact The University of Arizona Mohave County Cooperative Extension at 101 E. Beale Street, Suite A, Kingman AZ 86401-5808 or telephone (928) 753-3788.

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