Guide to Growing Fruit In Containers

Containerised fruit trees are decorative as well as fruitful. They make an attractive feature for a patio so fruit growing is possible even without a garden. Almost all fruit trees and bushes can be grown in containers and there are valid reasons for growing them in containers whatever size your garden.

Container growing is particularly useful for less hardy subjects such as peaches, nectarines, apricots and figs, which may need some protection at flowering time or in the winter.

Growing fruit in containers enables fruit with special soil requirements to be grown, for example blueberries, which prefer an acid soil. It is also an ideal way to restrict the growth of more vigorous fruits such as figs.

Most tree forms can be used for pot grown trees; Minarettes and Patio trees being particularly suitable. The container limits the size of the tree and so most rootstocks are suitable but the more dwarfing rootstocks are generally best.

SIZES & TYPES OF CONTAINER

Plants should be potted into containers slightly larger in diameter than their root area - up to 7.5cm (3in) larger, and repotted in to a larger container each year until the final desired size has been reached. It may be tempting to put a small plant into a large container straight away but this is not advisable as the volume of compost in relation to the roots is too great to create water movement and air circulation through the soil, which will result in stagnant compost and may in turn cause root death. A wide range of containers are available and most are suitable provided they have adequate drainage holes.

TYPES OF COMPOST

For most fruit trees and bushes a proprietary loam-based compost such as John Innes No. 3 is best. Never use garden soil as it is not sufficiently well drained for pot culture. Plants requiring acid conditions (e.g. blueberries, cranberries and lingonberries) must be grown in an ericaceous compost.

ROOT FORMATION AIDS

We strongly recommend the use of rootgrow™ when planting to encourage strong root growth and aid establishment. Click for here for more information on rootgrow™.

POTTING

Bare rooted or container grown plants can be used. Any thick, thong-like roots should be cut back and at the same time any broken roots trimmed off, so that the root ball fits the pot. If the roots are a little too large for the pot, they may be trimmed back so that they sit freely in the pot without curling up. The roots on the outside of the rootball of container grown plants should be teased away to prevent a pot-bound effect.

Clay pots should be crocked to provide good drainage, using broken pot fragments. Plastic pots usually have adequate drainage but should be crocked if necessary. The stem of the plant should be positioned in the centre of the pot at the same depth as it was previously, at about 2.5-5cm (1-2in) below the rim to allow for watering. The pot should be filled carefully, firming as it is filled. Once potting is complete, the pot should be stood on two bricks or on 'pot feet' to ensure good drainage.

STAKING

Container grown fruit trees should be staked to keep the tree straight. This is best achieved by plunging a starter tree stake or stout bamboo cane 2.5cm (1in) in diameter and of suitable length into the container to its fullest extent and tying the tree to it loosely to allow for expansion of the trunk.

REPOTTING

The tree or bush should be repotted each year to a larger pot until it has reached the final desired size. Thereafter, it should be kept in the same container but the compost changed each autumn. If a slow-release fertilizer is used (for example Osmocote or Vitax Q4), it should be mixed with the compost when repotting is carried out.

Repotting should be carried out in late autumn by turning the pot upside down and by tapping the rim, gently knocking the plant out of the pot. The thicker, thong-like roots should be trimmed by about one tenth and if it is becoming pot bound, by teasing out and trimming off up to 10% of the secondary roots. Any loose soil should be removed from the rootball.

The watering requirement of potted plants varies according to the size of the plant, time of year and the weather. During the winter months, little or no watering is required although the compost must not be allowed to dry out completely. During the spring, the need for water increases and at the height of the summer, pots may need watering once or twice every day. They should be watered when the surface of the compost starts to dry out. Over-watering should be avoided, especially with small plants that do not have the capacity to get rid of excessive amounts of water around the roots through transpiration through the leaves. Contraction of the compost away from the side of the pot is a sign that it has become extremely dry.

Liquid feeding should be carried out every seven to ten days during the spring and summer, using a high potash feed such as the Ken Muir Strawberry Feed (which can be used for trees/bushes in containers during the growing season) or a tomato fertilizer. However, if an 'Osmocote' slow-release fertilizer is used according to manufacturer's recommendation then this will not be necessary for a period of time.

Watering can be time consuming but it is possible to install an automatic system which, although not perfect, will enable the task to be carried out without an operator.

FROST PROTECTION

During periods of severe frosts which can occur during the winter, containerised fruits can be killed by freezing winds which penetrate the wall of the container and kill the roots. The tree or bush should therefore be moved to the side of the house, away from the prevailing wind. For extra root protection the container should be lagged with sacking or other suitable insulation.