Want to grow flowers, vegetables, or herbs but you don't have a place for a garden? No problem. Container gardening is a wonderful solution.

Almost anything you grow in the ground can be grown in a container, often with better results. That is because you have absolute control over the quality of the soil. In addition, a moveable container allows you to take advantage of, or protect your plants from, the elements. Finally, container plants usually have fewer insect and/or critter problems than in-ground plants. All good reasons to plant in containers, but let's not forget that gardening in raised containers also puts less strain on your back and knees.

No matter what you want to grow, from tasty tomatoes to colorful coleus, from aromatic herbs to fragrant flowers, here's your shopping list:

♦ Healthy plants--those with firm white roots and without holes or bite marks on the leaves (a sign of insects). And, if you plan to plant several types of plants in the same pot, choose those that have similar light and water requirements.

♦ A container with good drainage holes--this is a must! (If you choose a large, heavy container, non-dissolvable packing peanuts or plastic milk cartons come in handy to reduce the amount of soil needed to fill the pot.)

♦ A good potting mix (not a heavy soil, topsoil or garden soil) and compost that can be mixed together in a 3(mix)-to-1(compost) ratio.

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Local Activities of Interest

Art in the Garden
Where: SCC Horticultural Gardens
When: Through May 26
A display of sculptures by NC artists in the beautiful SCC gardens. Sculptures for sale with a percentage going to the gardens. For more information call 910-695-3382.

Growing Hydrangeas
Where: SCC Ball Visitor Center
When: Friday, May 18; 10am

Cooking with Herbs
Where: SCC Ball Visitor Center
When: Saturday, June 30; 10:30am-12pm
A workshop conducted by Shawna Smith. Sample several dishes prepared using fresh herbs. Recipes will be distributed. Horticultural Society members $5/Non-members $10.

Taking Better Photographs in the Garden
Where: SCC Ball Visitor Center
When: Saturday, July 7; 8:30am-12:30pm
Get a better understanding of your digital camera with photographer Laura Gingerich. Practice taking photos in the SCC Horticultural Gardens. No experience necessary. Horticultural Society Members $10/Non-members $15. Space is limited. Bring your digital camera with a charged battery, a small pad, and pencil.
A slow-release granular or water-soluble fertilizer that contains micro nutrients such as boron, copper, iron, manganese and magnesium.

And here's the how-to:

- Choose a shady place in which to work so that the plants are not overly shocked by the sun during transplantation. Water the plants well.
- To prevent soil from seeping through the drainage holes of your pot, lay a coffee filter or fiberglass mesh screening over the hole. Do not use rocks or pottery shards—they will deter drainage. (If needed, insert packing peanuts to raise the soil level and cover with mesh.)
- Combine the 3:1 potting mix/compost mixture and put into a pot that is deep enough to encourage optimum growth. Fill to within one inch of the pot top. Water well.
- Gently spread the bottom roots of each plant and dig it in so that the top of the root ball is even with or a bit above the soil level. Add more soil mix as needed to level the soil. Do not overfill. Do not compress the soil; just lightly tap the plants into place.
- Apply fertilizer and water thoroughly until water comes through the drainage holes. This is how you should water every time. Once watered, the soil may settle in places, so fill as needed. Keep the container in the shade for the rest of the day.
- Do not put your containers in a dish or tray that holds water as these will encourage the roots to rot. Rather, if you wish to protect the surface under the pot, place it on something that provides air movement between the pot and the solid surface.

Now that you have your containers planted, what about maintenance?

- Continue to fertilize throughout the growing season: every six weeks if you used a granular fertilizer and every other week if you used a water-soluble fertilizer.
- Maintain a good, thorough watering schedule, especially from midsummer on, when the plant’s roots have completely filled the container. If the water immediately comes out the drainage holes, allow it to soak in a bit, then water again. Once the root ball is wet, the subsequent water will adhere to the moistened root ball.
- If blooms are decreasing on your flowering plants, you may want to use a fertilizer with a 15-30-15 N-P-K ratio to encourage continued blooming.
- Cut back your plants when they get leggy. Once the heat and humidity of summer starts, plants grow quickly and pruning them will encourage them to branch out. Rule your plants—do not let them rule you!

If you follow these simple basic principles, you will soon find how fun and rewarding container gardening can be. Just sit back, watch things grow, and, literally, enjoy the fruits (and vegetables and flowers) of your labor.

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**Strawberry Season is Here**

*By Janet Bryant*

When selecting strawberries, remember the best tasting berries will be the most attractive: bright red without dark or mushy-looking blemishes. Good strawberries are fragrant, firm, plump, and sport fresh-looking green caps.

Many people today swear by the vast superiority of hand-picked and locally-grown berries. These berries are freshest and have been handled far less than berries sold in stores. Use strawberries as soon as possible after picking or purchasing; they are best when eaten within 2-3 days.

Leave the green “caps” on the strawberries until using the berries in order to help maintain freshness. Wash just prior to using.

**Cheesecake Stuffed Strawberries**

- 24 large strawberries, hulls removed
- 12 oz. cream cheese, at room temperature
- 1 t. vanilla
- 3 T. confectioners’ sugar
- 1/2 c. almonds, finely chopped

Place cream cheese in a bowl and microwave for 30 seconds, until soft. Whip together cream cheese, vanilla, and sugar. Make a hole in the center of each strawberry without going through the bottom. Spoon or pipe the filling into each hole. Dip cheesecake end of strawberry into chopped almonds, making sure you completely cover the cheesecake filling with nuts. Lay strawberries in a serving dish. Sprinkle nuts around the dish. Chill and serve. Makes 24 servings.
What's Bugging You?
By Sandy McShea

A well respected local insect guru has predicted 2012 to be “The Year of the Spider Mite.” Our mild winter and long dry spring have provided excellent conditions for spider mite reproduction.

Members of the family Tetranychidae, spider mites are classified as a type of arachnid. They have eight legs and one body part, as do other arachnids such as spiders, ticks, and daddy-longlegs.

All spider mites are not the same, but it seems that if you have a plant, there is probably a spider mite that can be a problem. In pursuit of a good meal, the spider mites bruise and damage the plant’s leaves or needles by drinking sap with their sucking snouts. Evidence of spider mite occupation includes discoloration, scorch and premature leaf drop. Spider mites stress plants and can kill. Patches of fine webbing are another telltale sign of resident spider mites.

To the naked eye, spider mites look like tiny, moving dots; however, you can see them easily with a magnifying lens. Adult females are less than 1/20 inch long. They live in colonies, mostly on the undersurfaces of leaves. A single colony can contain hundreds of mites.

Various insects and predatory mites feed on spider mites and provide a high level of natural control. Pirate bugs, big-eyed bugs and predatory thrips can be important natural enemies.

According to the Colorado State University Extension Service, one reason that spider mites have become a problem in yards and gardens is the use of insecticides that destroy their natural enemies. It is always important to read the product labels on your garden center shelf. Chemicals such as carbaryl, malathion, and imidacloprid have been known to contribute to spider mite outbreaks.

Keeping your plants healthy and well watered is a start to combating spider mites. Periodic hosing of plants with a forceful jet of water can physically remove and kill many mites, as well as remove the dust that collects on foliage and interferes with mite predators. Disruption of the webbing also can delay egg production. The application of horticultural “summer” oil and insecticidal soaps can be helpful, but they require thorough coverage so that all mite stages are contacted. Dormant oils can be used in the winter and fall to delay the onset of a spring and summer spider mite infestation.

It’s Time to Prune (Or Is It?)

If you've been thinking about pruning back your spring-flowering shrubs and trees, now is the time. That is, if they've finished blooming. A few examples of plants that can be pruned in spring are azaleas, rhododendron, cotoneaster, dogwood, forsythia, quince, and magnolia.

There are several types of tools that are used for pruning. A by-pass pruner will allow you to make a close cut, and it is perfect for small branches. If you wish to cut larger branches, you’ll want to use a type of long-handled clipper called a lopper. For very large branches, a bow saw will probably be required.

No matter the tool, be sure to keep it clean and sharp. Good hygiene is also important when going from one plant to another. This is particularly true with fruit trees and rose bushes. Disease transfer can be nipped in the bud if you clean your tools with alcohol between plants.
**Plant of the Month: Baptisia**

*By Sandy McShea*

Baptisia is a genus of about 20 different and attractive, low-maintenance native plants that are well worth growing in your garden.

Native to eastern or midwestern North America, these lovely plants are deer and pest resistant, and, once established, are heat, humidity and drought tolerant, as well. Because Baptisisas are legumes, they are able to "fix" their own nitrogen and can therefore thrive in nutrient poor soils.

Herbaceous sun-loving perennials, Baptisia forms a large shrub-like mass that dies back to the ground for the winter. During mid-spring and early summer, Baptisia will produce, depending on cultivar chosen, striking blue, white, gray, or yellow flowers that mature into interesting seed pods.

Baptisia’s roots run deep! Do not plant them in a temporary location.

North Carolina’s native Baptisia Prairie Blue Indigo has been designated as “threatened,” but we are very fortunate to have many other cultivars available locally.

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**Monthly Gardening Activities**

*By Susan Strine*

- Amend planting beds with organic matter and fertilize soil based on soil-test results to encourage healthy plant growth. In sandy soil, fertilize with potash up to four times a year as this is a nutrient that leaches out of our soil rapidly.
- Mulch around plants to control weeds and conserve moisture.
- Start a compost pile. Avoid putting in any diseased plant material.
- Plant grape tomatoes along with basil in any good-sized container for a tasty and attractive combination.
- Choose landscape plants adapted to your site conditions. Consider such issues as light, moisture, and space availability, and avoid purchasing invasive plants or those susceptible to disease and pests. Go to ncswma.org to learn more about invasive plants in our Sandhills region.
- Consider planting flowering plants to attract pollinators to your garden. A side benefit will be having a yard populated with beautiful butterflies and birds. Plant some extra parsley and fennel to feed the butterfly caterpillars.
- Divide perennials to trade with friends and consider planting annuals for long-term color during the growing season. To limit stress on both you and your plants, do not plant during the heat of the day.

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Don’t miss our next edition in June 2012.

For additional copies of this and past issues of this newsletter, go to [ces.ncsu.edu and search for “Dig This”](http://ces.ncsu.edu).

Any questions, call the Master Gardener Volunteer Information Hotline  
910-947-3188

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