

All About Window Boxes



CAUTION: WINDOW BOXES MUST BE SECURED

In Linda Yang's book Town and City Gardener (Random House), according to a NYC building department inspector, window boxes must "appear to be no more hazardous than a carefully installed window air conditioner." **BE SURE TO FASTEN BOXES SAFELY** so the window box cannot **TIP OVER** or **SLIDE OFF** the sill. By the end of summer the box will be very top heavy with plants and could fall out of your window. **Plan carefully and tend regularly to make sure no one is hurt by falling window boxes!**

Choose the right container. Whenever possible, bigger is better. Boxes of terra-cotta and wood are more porous and therefore require more watering than plastic, cement, or metal. Be sure your box has drainage holes in the bottom. If you have some rocks, gravel or broken clay pots, put them in the bottom with a thin layer of newspaper over the rocks. This will improve drainage.

Use a lightweight soil, since your window box will get very heavy. Buy potting soil or make your own lightweight mix of garden soil or topsoil, compost or composted cow manure, and sand. Sprinkle in some slow-release granular fertilizer according to the package directions. Add some water and mix well so that the soil is damp to the touch and evenly mixed. If possible, put the window box in place before filling it with soil and plants – it will get very heavy by the time you've finished planting, so the less often you need to move it, the better. Fill the box about halfway with soil before planting.

Right plant, right place. Consider the amount of light, shade, wind, and heat in the location and choose plants accordingly. Drought-tolerant plants are a forgiving choice. Feel free to combine colors, textures, shapes, and heights. Don't be afraid to mix perennials and annuals, or flowering plants with ones that provide gorgeous foliage.

Consider the design! Put your transplants in place before planting. Decide how you want to arrange them. Look at the colors and the shapes of the plants. Put the tallest ones in the middle and the smaller ones in the front and back (remember you will be looking at the window box from inside your home). Some plants will get bushier during the summer and tend to "cascade". This will look great from the street and provide more visual interest. Plants that cascade include petunias, alyssum, trailing geraniums, trailing vinca, ivy, lobelia, sweet potato vine, and nasturtiums. Take a look at the whole box. Do you like the color scheme and arrangement? If not, you can still make changes.

Planting

Once you have the plants in place, remove them from their packs, gently “tickle” the roots with your fingers to loosen them, and place the transplants on the soil. Allow about 2-4” between the plants. If the root balls of the plants feel dry, you can dip the roots in a pale of water before placing them in the soil.

Cover and tuck the roots gently in the soil. Add more soil until the plants are all in place with soil covering their root balls. The soil level should be about 1 inch below the top of the box. Carefully press the soil around each plant. Water well and add more soil if necessary. If you have seeds to plant, pop them in now. Then take a look at the whole effect. Do you like the arrangement? If not, now’s the time to make changes.

Watering

Be water wise. Plants in containers tend to dry out faster than those in the ground, and even heavy rains may not reach your plants on a windowsill. Check your window box every day. Put your finger into the soil about an inch— if the soil is dry you will need to water. Water slowly and deeply—mornings or evenings are best.

Maintenance

Aside from regular watering, plants require two things:

- Frequent removal of dead flowers. This process is called “deadheading.” Your box will look more tidy and produce more flowers if you deadhead regularly.
- Periodic fertilizing. Every time you water a window box, nutrients leach out of the soil and wash right out of the box. The small amount of soil in a box “tires out” faster than soil in the ground, so you’ll have to fertilize more often. Fertilize when you water with a liquid fertilizer like fish emulsion or kelp. Follow the directions on the package for proper proportions. Top dressing with a layer of compost or worm castings also gives your plants a nutrient boost.

The Future of Your Plants

At the end of this season (early October), you can bring your window box and your plants indoors and enjoy them in a sunny windowsill for a while. Some of the plants will continue flowering indoors, and some (like ivies and oxalis) can be kept as houseplants. Coleus and geraniums can be overwintered indoors, and then taken back outside for next year’s window boxes.



Updated 4/26/2018