



High Five for Hanging Baskets

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Plants are a perfect way to set off many types of containers from simple terra cotta pots to fancy molded urns. Hanging baskets are sometimes thought to be divas of the container world. Typically sited at shoulder height or just above, their colorful contents can be viewed up close perfect for a sniff, an admiring inspection or even a taste if edible plants are grown.

Over the years hanging basket plants have gotten more diverse with offerings from ivy geraniums, petunias and tuberous begonias to bacopa, calibrachoa, and scaevola. Hanging baskets are a popular Mother's Day gift and you may have gotten one last weekend and are wondering how to take care of it. They are also easy DIY projects and many will pick up a few compatible plants and make their own hanging baskets.

Whether opting to create your own or selecting a ready-made one, do consider where it will be residing. Just like the plants in your garden beds, some hanging basket selections do better in sun, while others enjoy part to full shade. Those favoring bright sunshine will produce less flowers if placed in a shady site.



Calibrachoa by dmp2023.

Premade containers may contain a single species of plant like petunias or impatiens, or may have 2 or more compatible species in a larger pot. For ease of care, select a deep 14-inch pot if

possible. Plants will grow more roots and leaves as the season progresses and a larger pot will hold more water. When potting up your own hanging basket, use a light, well-draining soilless potting mix. Moisten it before placing it in the pot.

Plastic hanging pots will retain water better than those lined with sphagnum moss or coco-fiber but don't look as attractive. An inner layer of black plastic can help keep water in the moss/fiber lined baskets but be sure to make some holes for drainage.

Plants should be selected for light conditions but other factors to keep in mind when purchasing several different species for one basket are drought tolerance, fertilizer needs, whether plants need to be deadheaded or not, growth rate and color. Often plants with similar needs are grouped together at your local garden center. If not, read the tags as they will provide information on mature height and spread. Plants labeled as vigorous are likely to be fast growers.

Deadheading is the removal of spent blossoms. Usually plants like begonias, impatiens, lobelia and alyssum do not require deadheading. I find that both verbena and petunias do look better with occasional deadheading as well as cutting back stems that get too long and leggy. Other plant species may also appreciate a light haircut as the season goes on and they need to be encouraged to branch out.

Regular watering and fertilizing are key to season long, good looking hanging baskets. Typically, I start the season with some slow-release fertilizer that also contains micronutrients, like Osmocote or Nutricote in all my containers. Although the package says the nutrients last for 6 months or more, that would be at temperatures that are less than we typically experience during the summer. Because of this, about mid-July, one can reapply the slow-release fertilizer or I just switch to a water-soluble fertilizer mixed at half strength and applied once a week.

During the hot summer months or even now on sunny, windy days, container plants, including those in hanging baskets need to be checked every day to see if water is needed. Don't wait until plants are wilting to water. When the top surface of potting mix is dry, give plants enough water so that it is dripping through bottom drainage holes. Some self-watering pots can be purchased that do have reservoirs at the bottom to slowly water plants. Make sure not to overfill these pots as excess water can't easily drain out and roots may rot. Occasionally hanging baskets or other containers dry out so much that the potting mix pulls away from the sides and becomes hydrophobic (resistant to absorbing water). When this happens, it is best to place the basket or container into a large tub of water so they can be rewetted. Wilting plants may or may not recover.

While hanging baskets as well as other container plants do require daily monitoring and care, they reward us all summer with their cheery blossoms that dress up our porches, decks, entranceways and more. For questions about hanging basket plant selection or care or for other gardening questions, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.homegarden.cahnrc.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.

