



A Garden Compass Re-Publication

...by Dave Wilson Nursery 



With a little knowledge,
you can raise fruit trees
in decorative pots.

The Art of Growing Potted Patio Fruit Orchards

By Ed Laivo

In the modern suburban world, sometimes the only place for growing fruit trees is on the patio. Herein lies the challenge—special attention and effort are required to successfully grow fruit trees in containers.

Fruit trees best suited to container growing have specific requirements, and container environments are less forgiving than the ground. However, with just a little knowledge, you can raise fruit trees in decorative pots.

As is the case with other gardening specialties, growing fruiting plants in containers is an art—a skill to be personally developed and perfected. For a successful start, it is necessary to consider a few key requirements.

Container Type

I have tried many containers and found the easiest to work with are those made of plastic.

I use what is called a terracotta plastic pot and prefer the ones that do not have the rolled rim. Rolled rims crack easily, causing potential watering problems. Many varieties of fruit tree need to be root-pruned after three to five years of growing in a container. Plastic makes removal easy.

Clay, whiskey barrels and ceramic containers are heavy, expensive and easily damaged during transplanting. With plastic pots, the possibility of reusing the container when repotting or for potting something else is a benefit. The second-best choice is ceramic pottery. It has better insulation quality than plastic, although the initial cost is high and transplanting from a ceramic pot can be difficult. Wood containers are also suitable. I do not recommend wine or whiskey barrels as they are too shallow and fall apart with the first transplant.

Container Size

For trees and shrubs, I use two sizes: 20-inch and 24-inch containers.

If transplanting a 5-gallon tree or a first-year bare-root tree, plant it in a 20-inch pot. I transplant large-sized 15-gallon plants and plants from 20-inch pots into 24-inch pots. Roots tend to collect at the sides of the 15-gallon and 20-inch containers.

After transplanting to a larger container, the roots fan from the edge of the root ball into the new soil. Subsequently, the roots of these trees are better able to withstand root-pruning, partly due to the branch point established in the smaller container.



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These are
the easier-to-grow choices:

 **Apples**
On M27 rootstock

 **Genetic dwarf peaches and nectarines**
These are on standard rootstock and require aggressive root maintenance and feeding (twice a month) to keep them healthy.

 **Cherries**
The only rootstock that works well is the Gisela. The root maintenance is not bad, but regular feeding (twice a month) is a must.

 **Citrus on dwarfing rootstock**
Root-pruning is still important.

 **Figs**
I really like Black Jack.

 **Fruiting Mulberries**
Surprisingly well-adapted to container growing. Feeding is a must, but the root is very tolerant of root binding.

 **Pomegranates**
All are well-adapted to containers, but don't let them dry out. They defoliate and are reluctant to put on new leaves.

 **Loquats**
If you also grow apples, beware that loquat is a host to fire blight.

 **Olives**
All do very well in containers and require little work.

 **Blueberries**
Ideal container fruit plants. I like to use a lot of the small bark (75 percent) and a low pH potting soil (25 percent). No need for acid fertilizer as it is too high in nitrogen: 5-10-10 is fine. And no nitrogen in nitrate form!

Potting Medium

Potting medium requirements vary with plant type. Learn what your plant likes in the ground. While it is not a good idea to replicate the structure and composition of the ground, this information will educate you about what not to do. For example, some plants like acid soils, while others like above-average drainage. Some prefer lots of organic matter; others prefer more sand. I favor making mixes a little heavy (plenty of sand) to help retain moisture. Our hot summers can dry out a pot in a day. It is essential for the potting mix to drain well. Most bagged potting soils and planting mixes are fine to use as is.

Pruning

After about three to five years, some container-grown trees exhibit diminished vigor, a sign of being root-bound. In late winter, I choose one of two possible courses of action for such a tree: plant it in the ground or root-prune it. To root-prune, lay the container on its side and roll it to loosen the root ball. Pull the tree out of the container. With a shovel, preferably one with a square point, remove one-third of the root ball by slicing off the outermost part all the way around. Place the tree back into the desired pot and add fresh potting soil, tamping it down firmly.

After root-pruning, thin the canopy. It is thought that this helps to relieve stress on the redeveloping root. Just open up the canopy so plenty of light reaches the interior of the tree. This helps promote new growth low in the canopy, which leads to the replenishment of low-fruiting wood. After transplanting and pruning, thoroughly water the tree.

Fertilization

Obviously, the feeding of container-grown trees is critical, as they are completely reliant on the grower for all nutrients. Through the years, I have learned that each variety of fruiting plant requires a different feeding regimen. Citrus thrive on high-nitrogen fertilizer, but apples don't. Blueberries despise fertilizers with nitrogen in nitrate form; use ammonium sulfate instead, and only in small amounts. The general feeding approach outlined below will keep containerized fruiting plants healthy until you can determine individual feeding requirements.

Begin by using a 5-10-10 fertilizer that also has a good balance of micronutrients. I recommend at least 5 percent calcium. Feed once a month during the growing season. You may find that some varieties benefit from a mid-month feeding as well. The lower-nitrogen fertilizer will de-emphasize vigor (who needs fast growth in a pot?) while maintaining the health of the tree.

