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Make Eugene a Blooming Success!

by Sally McAlonan

Project City Pride, "Make Eugene a Blooming Success," is a community beautification campaign with the vision of making Eugene a special place full of color, charm, and beauty for residents and visitors to enjoy and appreciate. As part of the City Pride campaign, businesses, neighborhoods, schools, and residents are being encouraged to plant flowers. Projects include floral displays in flower beds, hanging baskets, and planter boxes.

Container gardening is simple enough even for the novice gardener and can be a wonderful way to add color on steps, storefronts, porches, etc. and create a cheery first impression. To get you started, here are some basic steps to create a successful container garden.

Choosing the Right Container

Containers for gardening come in all sizes, shapes, and materials. Wooden planter boxes, hanging pots, whiskey barrels, concrete tubs, peat, ceramic and clay pots all can be used. Just about anything that holds soil may be used as long as there is ample room for root growth and proper drainage. Choose a container that will enhance the size and shape of the plants, as well as the area where it will be located. It would be wise in any public area to have containers that are large and heavy enough to discourage vandalism.

Soil Preparation

Porous, well draining soil that is also moisture retentive is a must for successful container plantings. Ordinary garden soil should not be used as it will settle, forming a dense mass that will not drain properly, and roots will not be able to penetrate. Excellent potting mixes are available at nurseries, and garden or forest by-product centers. They may be purchased in bags or bulk for large scale plantings. If you pre-

fer, you can mix your own potting soil. For a simple all-purpose mix, use one-third peat moss; one-third compost, leaf mold, or ground bark; and one-third builders' sharp sand or perlite. Slow release organic or inorganic fertilizer can also be added to the soil. For small containers and hanging baskets, use more perlite for a lightweight mix. To prepare the container for planting, scrub the pot with hot water to remove any debris or disease. Cover the drain holes in the bottom with fine mesh screen or netting to prevent soil loss during watering. Soil should be moistened (but not dripping wet) before it is added to the container. When filling, pack soil but not too densely. To aid in drainage, set pots on bricks or wood blocks.

Plant Selection

Choosing the proper plants for your container garden will depend on personal taste, desired effect, climate conditions, exposure, and space. Just about any plant will survive in a container for a short period of time, but some are more reliable performers. Planters do not need to be limited to flowers. Trees, shrubs, vegetables, vines, herbs, etc. can be used successfully. Before selecting your plants, decide on the location for your container. North walls, under dense tree canopies, under overhangs, or patios are good examples of areas for shade-loving plants. East exposures, filtered shade, and areas receiving less than a half a day of sun are suitable for plants requiring partial shade. South and West exposures, and any area receiving more than a half day of sun are the best spots for sun loving plants. Be aware of microclimates created by reflected heat, high wind areas, etc. that will affect the plants.

When selecting your plants, choose plants that will be compatible. Bloom period, color, height and width, and cultural requirements are all factors to be considered. Annuals will provide color throughout the season, and can be planted closely together for a mass of color. Perennials and bulbs generally have shorter bloom periods, but they are hardy plants that will survive for many

years. Evergreen trees and shrubs provide year-round beauty. Herbs, vegetables, and foliage plants are wonderful additions for fragrance, texture, and variety. Local nurseries and garden centers can provide on the spot help in plant selection. Using transplants is the easiest way to get your container garden growing, but direct seeding is also possible. Seed packets and plant labels will provide the necessary planting instructions.

Watering and Fertilizing

Watering requirement of your container garden will depend on type of plants, location and climate. On hot, dry, windy days you may need to water your plants more than once a day. The easiest way to determine if the container needs water is to dig in the soil with your finger. If it is dry an inch below the surface, it is time to water. Never let your plants get to the wilting stage. Apply water to the entire soil surface until you see water flowing out the drain holes. Regular fertilizing will be necessary to replace the nutrients that are leached out by frequent watering. Liquid fertilizers provide nutrients quickly and are the best choice for the fast-growing annuals. Dry and time release fertilizers are a good choice for slow-growing trees and shrubs. Whatever your choice, be sure and follow label instructions. Keep plants tidy by pruning off any dead flowers, leaves and branches. Removal of spent blooms will keep plants blooming longer.

There are several sources available for further information on container gardening, as well as other gardening techniques. The Lane County Extension Master Gardener Program, Eugene Garden Club, local nurseries and garden centers and the local library all can help with gardening questions and information. In conjunction with the Project City Pride campaign, the Lane County Master Gardeners and Eugene Garden Club will be holding a container planting workshop. It will be held May 3, 10 am-12 noon, at the Campbell Senior Center. Pre-registration is required by April 30 by calling 687-5334 Monday-Friday, 7:30-4:00.

If you would like to volunteer your time for the city beautification projects, call 687-5310. Citizen involvement is the key word in this campaign.

[Sally McAlonan is a Parks Specialist/Horticulture Section for the City of Eugene.]

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