

How-to
guide

Container gardening with native plants



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Introduction

You can build a thriving, biodiverse ecosystem from the ground up ... even without any ground!

Growing native plants in a container garden is a fun, easy and meaningful step to help wildlife thrive wherever you are. This guide will help you get started even if you are a beginner. It includes:

- Step 1** Planning
- Step 2** Gathering materials
- Step 3** Setting up your container
- Step 4** Maintenance
- Step 5** Next Steps

Before you start

Find a spot for your container and consider the surrounding environmental conditions: light, wind, rain, etc. Think of it as an ecological space. Getting yourself into this mindset will not only help you choose the right plants, it will let you imagine the potential of your space.

Don't worry, it's simpler than it sounds; we've broken it down for you step by step.

Tip: native plants are the living foundation of ecology. They are beautiful, hardy, low-maintenance and support a vast diversity of insects, birds and mammals.

Compared with traditional exotic garden varieties, native plants sustain many more local species.



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Step 1 Planning: Choose plants

Native plant gardening means using the plants that have grown naturally in your area for millennia. Where you live *really matters!* Each Canadian ecozone and every habitat type therein has a different combination of native plants (a.k.a. your local flora).

Wherever you're located, there are hundreds of potential species to choose from. Some are easier to grow in containers than others. Explore the native plants that grow near you or check out our resources to get started.



Visit campus.wwf.ca to access:

- Ecozones & Easy Grow Native Plants
- Native Plant Nurseries
- Garden Goals
- Container Gardening video
- Stewarding your Container Garden for Wildlife

Image: Map of Canada showing the boundaries of each of the 15 terrestrial ecozones and the Carolinian Zone. Find your zone and learn about the plants that live there!



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Step 2 Planning: Find plants

The best plants for restoring habitat come from nurseries that specialize in native plants from local, ethical sources that do not harm wild plant populations. You can use our Native Plant Nurseries guide to find great native plant nurseries in your area.



Tip: let the growers at your local native plant nursery know that you're building a container garden and they'll be happy to recommend suitable plants.

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Step 3 Gathering materials

1. Potting soil
2. Large container (with drainage)
3. Watering can (or hose)
4. Trowel
5. Solid fertilizer (e.g. manure, compost, worm castings)

You don't need much to get started, just these five things in addition to your plants.

Tip: bigger containers work better — we recommend a minimum of 35 cm wide and 35 cm deep. Ask your supplier about containers made of durable materials that withstand freezing.





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Step 4 Setting up your container

1. Fill the container
2. Dig a hole
3. Unpot the plant
4. Place and press
5. Water

Follow these five steps to create your miniature garden. It's time to get your hands dirty!

Tip: it's best to do this in spring or fall. If you're doing it in summer, keep up with watering and you'll be fine.

1. **Fill the container** with potting soil, adding water as you go and mixing so that all the soil is moist enough to be squeezed into a "dirtball" but not so wet that water drips out when squeezed. Mix a few handfuls of solid fertilizer into the top third of the container.

Tip: don't fill all the way to the top. Get the soil up to 10 cm below the rim to prevent water and soil from spilling out. You can always top it up later.



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2. **Dig a hole** as deep as the height of the plant pot.



3. **Unpot the plant:** Turn it upside-down while holding one hand over the top of the pot, then gently squeeze the bottom of the pot until the soil and roots slide out. Massage gently with your fingers to loosen the roots.





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4. **Place the plant in the hole** you made and fill any gaps with soil. Place your hands around the stem and **press down firmly**.



5. **Water** all the plants thoroughly.

Tip: Go slow and steady. If the soil is absorbing the water, then keep going. This could take a few watering cans. When water is coming out at the bottom of the container, you're done.

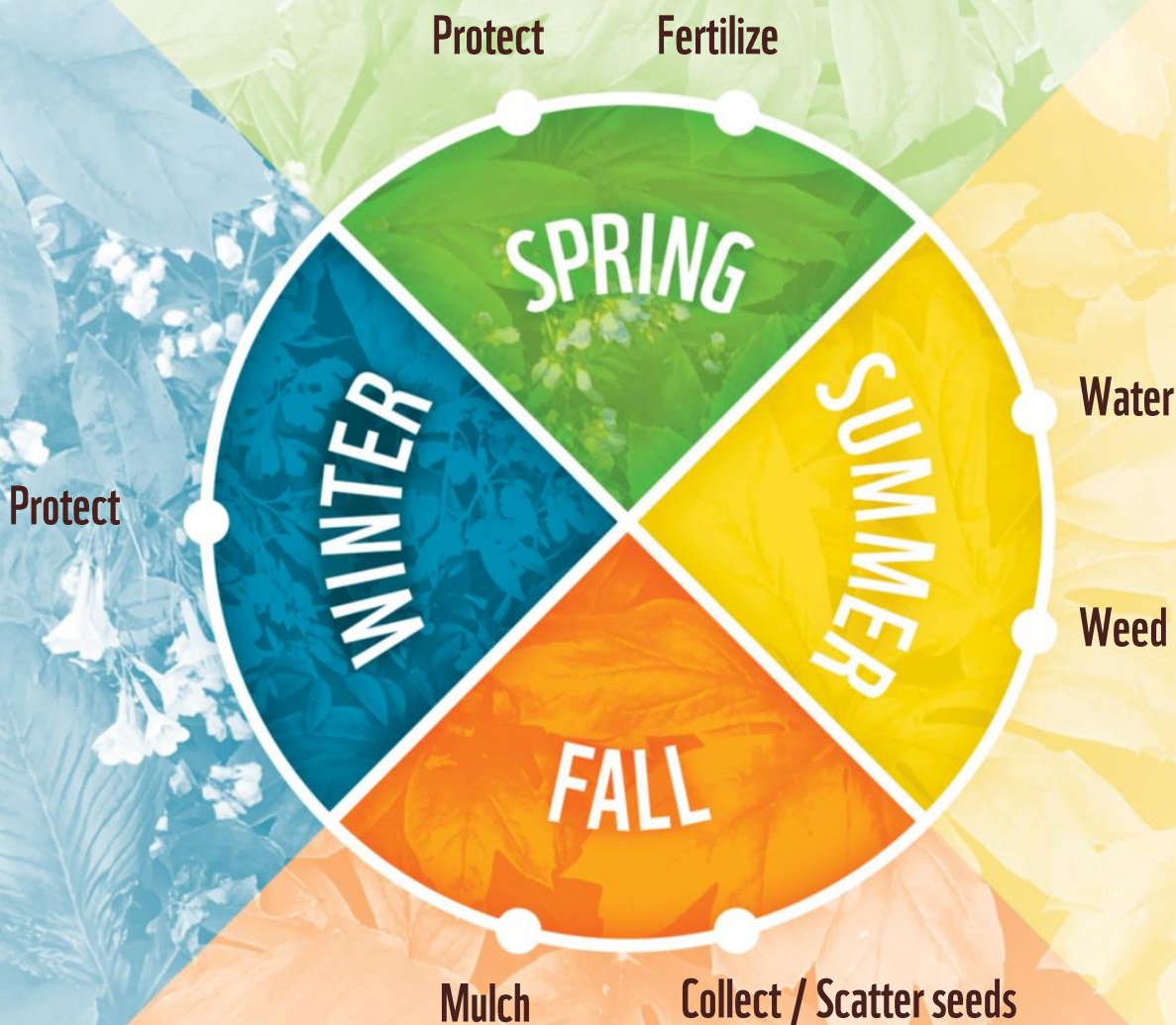




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Step 5 Maintenance: Four Seasons

The wheel below shows what your container garden needs in each of the four seasons. The timing of these activities will vary from year to year and will depend on your regional conditions.





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Maintenance: Glossary



Leave your plants to dry out and drop their seeds, or spread seeds from a seed pack in a thin, even layer over the soil surface. For larger seeds, bury them in the soil about two times deeper than the seed width.



Spread a few handfuls of solid fertilizer on top of the soil. Gently mix it in using a garden trowel or small rake.



Gather dried leaves, stems, small twigs and seed heads; scatter them to form a 5-10-cm-thick layer at the base of your plants. This provides protective insulation in the winter and early spring.



Bring your containers into an unheated building or cover them with a tarp. You can stuff the tarp with dry leaves to add even more insulation.



During the four to six weeks after planting, water plants once every three to four days if the soil is dry. Otherwise, water your plants thoroughly if you see signs of wilting (limp leaves or stems) or browning leaves, or about once a week if they aren't getting rained on.



New plants may show up in your container. These could be weeds or they could be baby native plants! If you're not sure what something is, leave it, take a picture and ask a garden expert before deciding whether to remove it.



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Step 6 Next Steps

Take photos of your beautiful container garden throughout the year to tell a visual story of your plants. Be sure to include any pollinators or other wildlife visitors! Tag @WWFCanada when sharing your photos on social media.

Tip: Some people set up social media accounts for their pets ... why not have a dedicated account for your garden?

Don't forget to record your container garden in your Living Planet @ Campus user dashboard! And count this activity towards your WWF Living Planet Leader student certification under the *Personal Actions for Sustainability* category.





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Photo Credits:

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