

Care of Hanging Baskets

Hanging Baskets, especially with our sale, are a fabulous Mother's Day gift. They are bright and cheerful and last much longer than cut flowers. If you are the fortunate recipient of a Mother's Day hanging basket or if you just want to take advantage of the sale and make your own yard even more beautiful, here are some care tips for your baskets.

- 1) Hang your basket in the right place. Some of our plants are sun lovers and some need some shade. Oh, and remember, the wires are removable. I have decorated with hanging baskets set on tables, in baskets, on inverted bird bath pedestals, and in washtubs. Sometimes they need to sit up on an overturned pot to rise above the surroundings in a flower bed, but they can be beautiful in any number of settings.
- 2) Water faithfully and well. Because air can circulate all around your basket, it may dry out faster than a pot on the ground. If you allow your basket to dry out, the soil can shrink and you may find that when you water it, the water runs across the surface of the soil, and down between the root ball and the basket sides. This is easy to miss if you are watering above your sight line, and with a basket, you often are. If you think you are watering thoroughly but the plant still seems dry, it might be worth taking it down and doing a little experimenting.

We leave headspace when we plant our baskets so the water can fill the surface area and then percolate throughout the soil. 10" baskets have about a 1.5 gallon capacity. If you time how long it takes you to fill 1 gallon milk jug, and fill another half way, you should give your basket nearly that same count on a stop watch. You should see water draining out each of the drain holes when it is thoroughly watered.

- 3) Your flowers will probably enjoy being fed with a water soluble fertilizer within a week or two of coming to your home. If you use a chemical fertilizer, once a week you flush your plant thoroughly with clear water to remove excess salts and acids that build up in the soil. With organic fertilizers, this isn't necessary.
- 4) Pruning trailing bits that get extra long and pinching the ends of branches will help your basket stay in shape. If you have not been pruning it and it has gotten leggy, you can cut it back aggressively, but usually you'll want to leave 2/3 of the plant intact.

Removing faded flowers will encourage the plant to continue to bloom, and encourage visitors. Hummingbirds usually don't visit plants with a lot of dead blooms, knowing that they won't provide nectar.

- 5) Your baskets may welcome beautiful butterflies, hard-working bees, and other beneficial insects so try to avoid using pesticides that will injure them. More insects are helpful than hurtful, so try not to spray. Hand-removal of any sucking or chewing bugs will usually be adequate on a hanging basket. You can also use a strong stream of water to dislodge them. Remember that neonicotinoid systemic insecticides kill sucking pests, but they also make nectar and pollen toxic. If bees aren't killed outright, they seem to lose their ability to find their way home. Scientists are finding hives with queens and babies but few live adults. The effects of the neonicotinoids may be responsible.

Some baskets will happily make the transition to houseplant when fall arrives. Give it a try. When it is ready for the compost pile, scrub out your basket, disinfect it with a 1:10 bleach/water solution and store it in a dry place over the winter. Next year, try your hand at creating a basket of your own. Anything that trails is a candidate for hanging—try your favorite flower...or maybe even miniature tomatoes...or strawberries...and hanging baskets make good gifts for Father's Day, too!