

Dish Up an Indoor Garden Delight

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If these occasional warm days we have been experiencing have you wanting to get out in the garden but the soil in your yard is still a bit too wet to work, why not create an indoor dish garden? The type of planting and the container it is planted in is limited only by one's imagination. Consider a planting of tranquil foliage plants, sun loving succulents, diminutive but colorful African violets or even a miniature fairy garden.

Almost anything can be used for the container including decorative ceramics, a repurposed salad bowl, a basket, wooden box or unique flea market find. Line any containers that are not watertight. Many dish gardens do not have drainage holes. That is not a problem as long as watering is done carefully so as not to allow plants to sit in water. Obviously, containers with drainage holes need a saucer underneath. Try to find a container at least 3 inches deep so plants have some room for roots to grow.

When deciding on the type of dish garden, first figure out where it will be placed. Will the plants have access to bright indirect lights, artificial lights or sunlight. For lower light conditions, plan on assembling a dish garden of foliage plants. Flowering plants require bright indirect light and may not even mind early morning sun. Succulents can take a more sunny exposure but being in a small dish garden they should not be exposed to full sun all day. Sites with morning or late afternoon sun work best for them.

Visit a local greenhouse and see what plants they have available. Plants should be on the small side. Look for miniature varieties whenever available. Keep in mind that all plants will eventually grow and if they get too large for your dish garden, you can pot them up and replace them with something a little smaller.

For foliage plants, consider creeping fig, small ferns, peperomias, fittonias, polka dot plants and small palms. African violets and their gesneriad cousins can be added to foliage dish gardens if placed in bright indirect light or used in a container by themselves. Succulents have become quite popular and there are a variety to choose from. If planning to use a cactus or two, think about handling them with gloves or tongs to avoid getting pricked.

Aside from plants and containers, you will need a potting mix, some small rocks or coarse sand and horticultural charcoal. Use cactus potting soil if succulents are being grown. Think about natural or purchased accents like rocks, pieces of bark, miniature statuary or garden accessories.

Before planting, decide if your dish garden will be primarily viewed from one side or all sides. Try different arrangements of plants in your container. Typically, dish gardens that are viewed on one side would have taller plants in the back or to one side while those admired from all sides might have a taller plant in the middle. The design, however, should be one that pleases you.

Put a layer of small rocks or coarse sand on the bottom of containers without drainage holes and then sprinkle a thin layer of horticultural charcoal. The purpose of the charcoal is to act to some extent as a water purifier. Neither the rocks nor charcoal are usually necessary for containers with drainage holes.

Next place in a shallow layer of moistened potting medium. Remove the plants from their pots and place in the container. Occasionally some of the potting mix that is present around the plant's root system might have to be removed in order to position plants in an attractive manner. Fill in around the plants with more of the moistened potting medium packing it firmly but not too tightly. The goal would be to have the level of the potting mix in the finished dish garden about a quarter inch or so lower than the rim so water would not run over the sides.

Lightly water the dish garden after planting is finished. Often succulent dish gardens are topped with a layer of small stones or sand to give them more of a desert look.

Some dish gardens can have accents of natural materials like rocks, shells or small branches trimmed to look like driftwood. Others may be decorated with a figurine or two. There are a vast array of fairy garden items from tiny doors to spritely fairy figures. Select decorative items in keeping with your theme.

Once planted, dish gardens need to be watered regularly. Check them every few days to determine an approximate watering schedule. Do not let them dry out so much that the potting mix becomes hydrophobic and water runs off rather than is absorbed by the mix. Depending on where the dish garden is located, it might be best brought over to the kitchen sink and watered thoroughly when needed. Excess water will either flow through drainage holes or for containers

without drainage, they can be gently turned on their sides with soil held in place with a paper towel to let excess water drain out if too much was added.

Groom plants removing yellow or dying leaves when necessary. Dish gardens on or near windowsills will need to be turned so plants will not lean toward the light. If plants outgrow the dish garden, replace them as necessary. Since the object is to keep the plants small, just fertilize twice a year with a quarter strength liquid fertilizer.

Have fun creating your dish garden. It is a great way to spend some time in late winter while waiting for the return of spring. For questions on making a dish garden or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.