

Go potty and grow natives in containers

Bob Dixon Extensions Officer Kings Park (Retired)
Tony Scalzo Editor For People & Plants



By grouping pots with plants of different colours you can create a colour splash in springtime. Photo: Tony Scalzo

People living in apartments, units or houses with small gardens, or even those with large gardens and challenging growing conditions, can easily grow many native species in containers.

Hanging baskets or pots are an ideal option for many native plants. In fact, some species may well grow far better in containers than in the open ground.

Many Western Australian plants have very specific growth requirements reflecting soil type, pH or drainage. It can sometimes be difficult to replicate these in a home garden.

Failure in the open ground may be due to unsuitable growing conditions such as poor gutless sandy soil (a number of species grow in heavier soils or very winter wet conditions), too much competition from surrounding vegetation (roots and shade) or soil-borne fungi or pests such as slugs and snails which can be easier to manage when plants are grown in containers.

There is also the benefit of being able to move plants and put them where they can be seen when they are in flower and looking spectacular.

There is nothing more annoying than having a beautiful flowering plant hidden in the backyard where no one can see it.

What type of plants do you want in your garden or on the porch? Perhaps it's something special such as rare or unusual plants; bird pollinated species which encourage birds into the garden (good for our mental wellbeing) and also helps control insects; plants that have stunning floral displays and long flowering seasons or attractive foliage.



Actinodium sp. Fitzgerald River and *Hibbertia stellaris*, Orange Stars, can be difficult to maintain in a garden as they have specific growth requirements, but they look great and perform well in containers.

Photo: Tony Scalzo

A wide range of species grow really well in containers so why not grow them? We grow lots of exotic species in pots giving them specialist treatments e.g. orchids and bulbous species such as tulips as well as lots of annual plants. Therefore, why not grow our own Western Australian terrestrial orchids (they need special treatments) and other plants with underground storage organs such as *Wurmbaea* and *Dichopogon* and lots of our annual everlasting species in containers?

From our own experience we are still on a huge learning curve regarding the culture of some native species, both in the open ground and in containers. However, we have grown lots of common, as well as rare, species in containers and have found that many species can flower more prolifically and for longer when grown in containers.

To get the best results from container-grown plants make sure to use a good quality 'free draining' potting mix suitable for Australian native plants. You can lighten commercial potting mixes by adding a coarse grade perlite (up to 10%) which improves drainage and adds air spaces to the mix.



Bob has been growing these two wetland *Diuris* species for 20 years. Orchids live in symbiosis with special fungi in the soil, therefore pure potting mixes are not suitable for container growing. The foliage dies down after seeding therefore pots need to be kept dry during summer, otherwise the tubers rot. Bob gets some seedling recruitment; however, tuber numbers increase over time through multiplication. Photo: Bob Dixon



There are three species of orchids in this container, only two flowering. The *Diuris* were planted then two other species recruited from seed blown into the polystyrene box. They do best in broken sunlight. The *Diuris* have been in the same container for years with no repotting or added fertilisers. The main pests that bother orchids are slugs/snails and mole crickets which eat the tubers. Photo: Bob Dixon

Tetralochea paynterae is a rare species that grows on banded ironstone. It flowers over a long period from mid-autumn through to late spring. The abundant and highly fragrant pink flowers will fill your house with their beautiful scent if the pot is placed near an open door or window.

Photo: Bob Dixon

Water the potting mix regularly to make sure plants do not dry out. In summer you may need to water every day. You may prefer an automatic reticulation system if regular hand watering is problematic. The application of a soil wetting agent suitable for native plants prior to summer can help prevent the potting mix becoming water repellent.

Maintenance is important such as pruning after flowering, staking, pest control and top dressing using slow release fertilisers or liquid fertiliser for native plants, if or when required.

The use of a non-organic surface mulch such as pea gravel, small pebbles or small crushed blue metal helps prevent the surface of the potting mix becoming water repellent. These surface mulches look great too.

Container choice is something to consider. Glazed pots look great but can be heavy and expensive. Nowadays there are containers made from new materials, such as those that include fibreglass, that are very lightweight.

Terracotta pots look great too, but you will need to paint the inside of the pot with a pot sealer to prevent them drying out. Black plastic pots are good if your budget doesn't stretch to the fancy expensive pots.

Lechenaultia formosa grows very well in containers and can look spectacular in hanging baskets flowering for a large part of the year. Photo: Tony Scalzo



Finally, for tricky species such as Brown Boronia, *Boronia megastigma*, which grows on the edges of swamps and doesn't like having its roots dry out, self-watering pots can provide the answer, but don't forget to move them to part shade in summer!

Growing WA native plants in pots is not hard, so why not go potty and give it a go! ■



Above: *Wurmbaea dioica ssp alba*, grows well in pots. Most people may prefer the more common form with marron markings on the petals. In cultivation it produces large quantities of highly viable seed. Pots need to be kept dry during summer otherwise the underground storage organs rot. Photo: Bob Dixon

Top right: When deciding what plants to grow in pots consider aiming for bold colour contrasts which appeal to the eye, such as this combination of *Chorizema dicksonii* and *Tetratecha paynterae*. Photo: Tony Scalzo

Right: *Dampiera wellsiana* is very difficult to grow in the open ground but does well and flowers longer in containers. Many species of *Dampiera* and *Scaevola* grow well in containers. Photo: Bob Dixon

