



Hanging BASKETS

For the garden, patio or balcony

I HAVE STANDARD REQUESTS FROM FRIENDS FOR THEIR BIRTHDAY GIFTS -THEY WOULD LIKE A MINIATURE GARDEN TRAY, OR A COUPLE OF HANGING BASKETS. THIS USUALLY MEANS I ARRIVE AT THE PARTY WITH CLOTHES A LITTLE WRINKLED OR MUD STAINED, A BASKET DANGLING FROM EACH WRIST, LIKE SOME ECCENTRIC IF HERBACEOUS FIGURE OF JUSTICE.

■ SELINA SEN

Baskets are the perfect solution for soil-less balconies, or small urban gardens where space is a constraint. A dull view from the window can be altered with their clever placement, with eye-popping seasonal flowers if windows get winter sun, or lush greens if located in a shaded spot. If you have a larger garden it is possible to pep up a tree which sheds in winter such as a champa. Flowering baskets suspended from bare branches make for a vivid display.

Eye level placement works well for windows; else baskets can be suspended from wrought iron brackets or rawl plugs in concrete or brick overhangs. I have designed tall metal spikes with arms for baskets to hook onto. These end in prongs like the tines of a giant fork and can be pressed into the earth for stability. These are very versatile and can be placed anywhere to uplift a dull corner or a bald patch of lawn.

While baskets have certain advantages such as they do not require weeding and are safe from field rats or visiting cats, there are two aspects where greater care, than that required for ground planting, is needed. Due to being suspended, baskets are windblown and dry out quickly. Daily watering is the norm. This watering in turn makes the nutrients leach out and hence a regular feed must be incorporated into the growing and flowering season. With the growing popularity of hydroponics a variety of polymer gels are available online which can reduce the need for daily watering; however these are fairly expensive. I simply add chopped up bits of sponge, such as florists use in their wire basket bouquets, and this is fairly successful in retaining moisture, besides being far more cost effective. If the soil shrinks inwards from the edges of the basket and leaves look limp a quick remedy would be to plunge the basket into a bucket of water,

submerging it for five minutes should revive it. It would be necessary to prod the soil which might be too clayey, requiring some reworking.

Regular feeding for seasonal flowers is simple and a variety of liquid manures are available online. I make an organic sherbet, ingredients of which can be sourced from any large nursery. I soak fresh cow dung with sarson ka phalli (mustard cake formed from the residue of the pods when oil is pressed) and add a few spoons of bone meal into the slurry. This is left to decompose in a covered drum for at least a month. Half a mug of this concoction is dissolved into a standard watering can. Slightly odorous but produces healthy plants with profuse flowering.

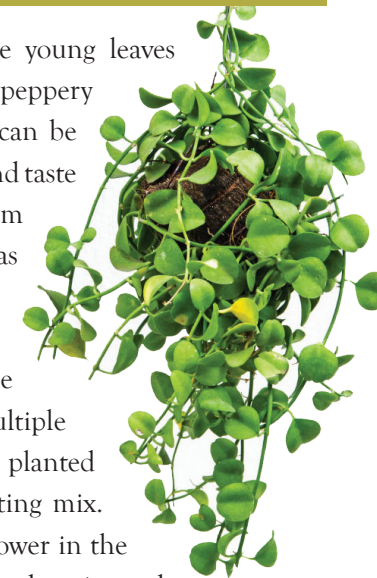
Hanging baskets with trailing flowers are the most popular and some seasonal flowers are especially easy for beginners. A good place to start is with petunias, with humus rich compost added in the potting mix they bloom and bloom, I get about fifty flowers at a time in the Bravo variety. Since petunias germinate in slightly cooler temperatures it is best to buy ready seedlings from a nursery supplied from the hills, even small nurseries stock them, by colour and

variety. If keen to germinate your own seeds you will need to germinate in a tray and then transplant into the basket when the true leaves appear on the seedling. Nasturtium jewel mix with beautiful ivory and green variegated leaves is recommended for seed germination



for the novice gardener. The young leaves can be picked and make a peppery addition to salads, the fruit can be pickled in brine and vinegar and taste a bit like capers. Pelargonium also trails well, as do fuchsias and begonias, especially in hill stations. While most people prefer a single type of flower to be planted, multiple flowers and variegated leaves planted together make for an interesting mix. It is best to plant the main flower in the centre such as a geranium and variegated ivy, lobelia, verbena etc towards the edges. It is possible to produce a new and interesting mix every season. Of course for mixed plantation a larger size basket is preferred, at least 12-14 inches in diameter.

Baskets can be fashioned out of many things starting from coconut shell halves, for succulents and orchids, to giant wrought iron spheres up to three feet in diameter. The latter are naturally made to order, and can be quite a conversation piece. Of course few would go in for seasonal planting with such large baskets and succulents and ferns would last much longer. Both require diffused light in a shaded area, regular misting to keep, especially ferns moist, a good potting mix and for succulents a regular spray of fungicide. Very large baskets get ultra heavy when watered and one solution to reduce weight is to fill the centre of the sphere with polystyrene chips.



I AM GOING TO SUGGEST SOME SIMPLE DIY STEPS TO MAKE YOUR OWN HANGING BASKET



Suspension chains and brackets should be reinforced. In succulents, sedums, jade, kalanchoes, the trailing string of pearls, string of hearts and nickels cascade over the edges of the baskets in a short time. The trailing strings are temperature sensitive and not so suited to harsh extremes such as in Delhi.

Ferns when grouped together and misted draw moisture in each other's company and some interesting varieties are rabbit's foot, polypodium, golden, and sword. Stag horn fern in a kokedama is for the ambitious gardener, but is very fashionable. It is possible to get quite inventive through trial and error. I have made holes around the circumference of an ordinary matka with a screwdriver, planted in the holes and suspended this on a macramé holder.



REQUIREMENTS:

- One 12-14 inch metal wire basket with metal chains (these have a longer life than plastic ones and air circulation for roots is much better) Never buy plastic supports, they snap in the heat.
- 250 gms (dry) of moss, basket liner in a breathable but waterproof fabric such as garden netting, or reconstituted coir lining, a thin plastic packet to cut open as an inner layer, some sponge bits cut into two inch pieces.
- Good quality potting mix and a suitable plant or companion plants.

METHOD:

- Soak the moss in a bucket of water so it swells and expands. Place the basket comfortably on an empty pot so it forms a steady base. Cut several one inch holes in the plastic packet, this is only to retain the moisture. Place the basket liner in the basket. If going in for side planting as in kalanchoe or petunia with lobelia and ivy, snip holes in the liner large enough to insert the young plant comfortably from the sides as well.
- Reserve some of the moss for encasing the top, mix some into the soil with the sponge, and place some in a thin layer above the liner but below the packet.
- Now remove the plant from the pot and place it in the centre, pack it firmly with the prepared soil. Next go in for the trailing plants at the side. Pack in more soil, and pat down with the wet moss, which can be secured with a bit of string.
- Water well. Watch it at ground level for a couple of days before suspending. In two weeks you should see new leaves and perhaps flowers too.

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