

# Tips for the Consumer: Caring for Hanging Baskets

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**H**anging baskets represent a large and expanding segment of the bedding plant market. For the producer, baskets are high value items. To the consumer, baskets sometimes appear to be irresistible. At a recent flower show, I watched people stroll through a greenhouse display with hanging baskets overhead and flowering potted plants on benches. Nearly every person who entered the display stopped to examine the baskets or offered a favorable comment about them. Although none of the display plants were for sale, about half the people entering the display wanted to purchase a basket. The chenille plants were particularly attractive that day (one later disappeared).

This level of consumer interest in hanging baskets is very good news for greenhouse growers. The problem arises when the customer takes the plant home. Many people purchase baskets but have no idea how to care for them. As a result, the flower display deteriorates, and the customer's dissatisfaction eventually comes to rest with the retailer (who blames the wholesale producer). The product was perfectly good to start with, but it doesn't matter. The homeowner was not successful, and the producer will eventually experience the dissatisfaction. One way to break this cycle is to educate the consumers. Help them be successful. Tell them what they need to know to maintain their basket and supply them with (i.e. give or sell) whatever materials they need to accomplish the job.

The problems homeowners have with hanging baskets are usually related to the failure to recognize what the plant needs to grow. In general, these problems can be grouped into one of four categories; (1) **failure to match the species with the environment** , (2) **improper watering** (usually not

enough), (3) **improper fertilization** (usually none), and (4) **abandonment** (usually while on vacation).

### **Match the Species with the Environment**

Annuals in baskets, as in the garden, do best under specific environmental conditions. That is, some species prefer sun, some thrive in shade and others do well in either sun or partial shade. If the homeowner wants a hanging basket for a particular location, he/she should choose a species suited to that environment, i.e. for sunny locations choose geranium, lantana, nasturtium or dusty miller; for shady locations choose impatiens, fuchsia or coleus (see the table below for a more complete list). Help your customers make the right choice. Supply a list of species and the corresponding light requirements.

**Table 1. Annual bedding plant species and preferred light environments.**

| <i>Full sun</i>  | <i>Sun to partial shade</i> | <i>Shade</i>      |
|------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|
| Nasturtium       | Lobelia                     | Coleus            |
| Vinca            | Pansy                       | Impatiens         |
| Portulaca        | Alyssum                     | Double Impatiens  |
| Lantana          | New Guinea Impatiens        | Tuberous begonias |
| Petunias         | Thunbergia                  | Fuchsia           |
| Geraniums        | Abutilon                    |                   |
| Verbena (vining) | Chénille plant              |                   |
| Brachycome       | Ivy Geraniums               |                   |
| Carnation        | Fiberous Begonias           |                   |

### **Watering**

Most people do not water frequently enough. Baskets contain big plants with small root volumes. Large plants in sunny (or wind exposed) locations may need water one or more times per day. The smaller the basket volume, the more difficult watering can become. Encourage customers to purchase 10" baskets, since 8" baskets will be too difficult to manage outdoors. Inform them of the frequent water demand the plants will have.

### **Fertilization**

Because of the limited root volume and large plant size, baskets run out of fertilizer fast. When the fertilizer is depleted, plants stop growing and flowering slows or stops. Baskets must be feed on a regular basis, every seven to 14 days with a

liquid feed. Alternatively, a slow release formulation must be used. Controlled release formulations (CRF) may be best for the homeowner. These can be sold, or placed into the basket for free, at the checkout counter. Sticking two to three CRF tablets (i.e. the CRF prills which are glued together to form a thimble shaped tablet) per 10" basket at the point of purchase will supply all the nutrients required for the season.

### **Abandonment**

While on vacation a well-cared-for basket can go downhill or die in a short time. Remind the homeowner about the consequence of leaving a basket without care for an extended period of time. Homeowners can have a neighbor water the basket while away. If this is not possible, encourage them to place the basket in a protected location—in the house, on the north side of the house or under the heavy shade of a tree. Baskets should always be watered thoroughly before leaving.

Supply care tags with all baskets or copy the following checklist and give it to your customers to help them have a positive experience with the basket you sell them this spring.

#### **Hanging basket care for the homeowner.**

- Purchase sun-loving species for sunny locations and shade-tolerant species for shady locations. Ask for help if you are not sure which to choose.
- Plants in baskets need lots of water. Check daily and water thoroughly when dry. Do not let plants wilt.
- Fertilize baskets every seven to 14 days with a general purpose liquid feed **or** use three slow release fertilizer tablets per 10" basket at the beginning of the season.
- When going on vacation, water baskets thoroughly, then ask a neighbor to water your basket while you are away or place the basket in a shaded, protected location.

