



DISH GARDENS

Dish gardens are, in effect, miniature landscapes. It is hard to find an office that does not have at least one bedraggled florist dish garden sitting on top of a desk or file cabinet. If you choose to make your own dish garden, you can choose more interesting containers and plants, and add unique touches using stones, driftwood, figurines and statuary, shells, lichens, birds' nests, or other waterproof decorations appropriate to the style of garden you create.

Dish garden basics include selecting a container, deciding on a style (lush tropical foliage, desert landscape, bog garden, etc.), and deciding where you will keep the garden.

LOCATION: Determine where you plan to grow your dish garden. You will need to select plant material that can live in the location you choose. Look at the temperature, light, and humidity, as well as available space (a large dish garden may not fit on your kitchen windowsill; a small dish garden with three or four tiny plants can live happily under your office desk lamp.)

CONTAINERS: Most dish gardens are planted in non-draining containers. This works okay, as long as you learn how to water in this situation. Look for unique containers such as antique boxes, baskets (lined), tureens, shallow bowls, etc., in fact, just about anything that will hold water. In general, shallow works better than deep, and will not be as heavy when wet. Bonsai containers are great for making dish gardens, as they tend to be shallow, *and* they have drainage holes.

PLANTS: Smaller-leaved, slower growing plants are easiest to maintain in a dish garden, but just about anything can be used. It is important to choose plants that are compatible in their care requirements, and that will not rapidly outgrow the container. Start with plants that look slightly small, so that they have a little room to grow.

PLANTING: It is a good idea to test out an arrangement while plants are still in their individual pots. Try several groupings, until you find one you like.

—If your container has a drainage hole, cover it with window screen or clay chards. Cover the bottom of the container with a small layer of coarse drainage material (fine gravel, horticultural charcoal, etc.). Add a small layer of potting medium, using a commercial potting mix for foliage gardens or a coarse, sandy mix for succulents.

—Remove plants from their pots, and place in the container. You may have to remove some of the soil from the root ball, in order to place plants close together. When handling spiny plants, use leather gloves or rolled-up newspaper to protect your fingers.

—Fill in around and between plants with more potting medium, and gently firm the mix around the plants. Do not fill potting medium above the original soil level of the plants.

— If there are no drainage holes, lightly water the dish garden. In containers with drainage, water thoroughly, but discard any excess water collected in the saucer. It is important that the soil not stay saturated.

—Add decorative accents to your dish garden.

DISH GARDEN CARE

LIGHT: Most foliage plants and many succulents are happy with bright indirect light or some direct morning sun. Avoid the hot mid-day sun. Cacti prefer direct morning or late afternoon sun. Flowering plants generally bloom best with direct morning or late afternoon sun.

WATER: For a dish garden without drainage holes, the best method of watering is to water thoroughly, then turn the container on its side (hold soil in place with paper towels) and let the excess water run out. If the container has drainage holes, water slowly and evenly until some water runs out of the bottom. Allowing water to run through the medium helps to prevent soluble salt build-up, which can damage leaves and leave an unsightly crust on the soil surface or container rim.

HUMIDITY: Cacti and most succulents are happy with average house humidity. Ferns and some other foliage plants may

benefit from a daily light misting of their leaves early in the day.

FEEDING: Do not over-feed a dish garden—after all, you want the plants to remain a reasonable size for the container. Fertilize at 1/4-strength, as needed, when plants are actively growing. Do not fertilize a carnivorous garden.

MAINTENANCE: Wash the leaves of foliage plants periodically with plain water, to discourage insect pests. Prune off damaged or dying leaves, or replace unsightly plants. To safely remove one plant from a grouping, use a long-bladed knife, and cut straight up and down around the base of the plant, so as to limit damage to the adjacent root balls. Lift the plant free.

SUGGESTED PLANTS:

Foliage Dish Garden

Creeping fig
English ivy, small-leaved cultivars
Parlor palm
Janet Craig compacta
Ferns (small sizes)
Ripple Peperomia
Mini Fittonia (Nerve Plant)
Dracaena marginata
Prayer plant
Calathea cultivars
Pink splash (Hypoestes)

(If grown in bright light, add an African violet for flowering.)

Cactus Dish Garden

Astrophytum species
Mammillaria species
Opuntia species
Notocactus species

Succulent Dish Garden

Sedum, trailing varieties
Hoya, small-leaved varieties
Jade plant, small-leaved
Euphorbia species
Haworthia species
Aloe species
Cacti (assorted small plants)

Carnivorous Garden

Venus Fly-trap
Sundew
Butterwort
Pitcher plant (small varieties)

Miniature Landscape

Dwarf Acorus
Serissa varieties
Ficus 'Too-little'
Baby's Tears
Ming Aralia
Club moss

(Look for small pots of bonsai material.)