



POT LUCK

Short on space? PENNY WOODWARD shows how to grow fresh herbs in multi-pocket pots and planter bags. Plus product reviews.

If you only have a balcony, very small garden, or just love having herbs close to your kitchen door, then multi-pocket pots are great for creating herbal variety and colour in a handy or tight spot. Herbs lend themselves to being grown in pots as they mostly like good drainage and are not too demanding when it comes to feeding.

I had always been a bit dismissive of growing herbs in pots with lots of pockets, seeing them as too small to warrant the effort. But after having

tried a range of them, I've changed my mind. With good potting mix, the right position and a reasonable feeding regimen, the herbs I tried have thrived in all the pots, and they look great too. However, even with reliable feeding, they will need to be repotted every couple of years.

And before you head out in search of a pot, there are some important points to consider:

- 🌱 How well does the style work?
- 🌱 What potting mix is needed?
- 🌱 Which herbs work best in pots and in your conditions?

Which herbs to choose?

As you are fitting several different herbs into one growing space, each plant will only have a small amount of soil. So the herbs you choose need to be strong growing, fairly tough and be able to cope with competition.

You also need to decide where in the pot to plant each herb. I found that, universally, all the pots I trialled dried out near the top first and stayed wetter at the bottom. So plant the more water-hungry plants at the base (eg. mint, lemon balm, basil) and those that don't mind it dry at the

top (eg. thyme, oregano). Herbs planted in the very top of the pot, where there is more space for roots and leafy parts, will grow more vigorously than those in smaller pockets. So also aim to plant herbs you want to harvest the most in the top. I have used only culinary herbs for this trial, but you can also choose medicinal or pest-repellent herbs.

The right potting mix

You need a good-quality potting mix that does not contain any non-organic wetting agents or water crystals. There

are a number of good organic mixes available to which you can add organic water-retaining crystals or coir. I used coir, at the ratio of two parts potting mix to one part coir. This helps increase the water-retaining capacity of the potting mix – important for most of these pots, but especially any hanging pots or those without saucers.

Coir comes in blocks that are broken up by putting them into a container and adding water. Once the coir has absorbed the water and expanded, it can then be added to the potting mix.

Being water-wise

Ensuring that all parts of multi-pocket pots get watered once they are planted up can be difficult. Water tends to drip out of the side pockets, not making it to the centre of the pot, and encouraging the roots to grow near the edges.

To help remedy this, I inserted a plastic pipe (around 20mm in diameter) with holes drilled into it every few centimetres into each pot. Pouring water into the tube rather than the pot distributes it more evenly. Once the pots are planted,



Left and below: Plastic pipes with drilled holes used for watering and adding liquid feed.



water well and then don't water again until the top feels dry. Make sure you don't over-water as more herbs are killed by over-watering than by not watering enough.



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Tried and tested

Bloom Master Australia

This pot is attractive and versatile, and comes with a strong four-strand wire hanger so that it can sit on the ground or be used as a hanging basket. I tested the smallest available, which worked well, but I'd choose a bigger one next time.

Plastic, 20cm high and 25.4cm wide, hanging basket (green or terracotta colour). Other sizes: 28cm, 30.5cm, 35.5cm, from \$14.90 to \$59 (excluding postage).

Contact: bloommaster.com.au; 03 5983 6281.

Greenbo Planters

These stylish plastic pots are designed to be placed over any shape or form of railing up to 8.5cm in width, without needing screws or brackets. They come in a range of colours and have detachable drip trays. The herbs I planted thrived in the two deep pockets of soil. I planted the more shallow-rooted thyme over the shallow central part. I didn't add coir to this

potting mix as the greater depth made it unnecessary. 30cm high, 29cm width, about \$45. Larger 'trough' size 29cm high, 34cm width and 60cm long, about \$60. Available at nurseries, hardware stores and online. Contact: greenbo.com.au; 02 9262 5202.

Growstack Planter

This smart concept has three-pocket plastic pots which fit into the ones below to create a tower. They can sit on the ground (detachable saucer



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provided) or be hung by a chain, but I had trouble getting mine to hang straight. The one I trialled had two tiers and worked well with six different herbs planted.

\$35 (excluding postage) for a stack of four pots with a drip tray and chain, each pot is 15cm high and 35cm wide; a stack of four is 44cm high; \$25-\$30 for herb starter kits (seeds, jiffy pellets and pots, propagation tray and dome, instructions). Contact: herbgardenkits.com.au; 02 4787 5608.

Northcote Pottery Herb Pots

The Primo pot is made of glazed terracotta and comes



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in a range of colours. It has one large opening at the top and three pockets around the outside. It also has a fixed saucer which, during my wet spring, meant the pot stayed too wet and a couple of plants didn't thrive. I then moved it under cover and the plants have done well.

The CottaSEAL unglazed terracotta herb pot is bigger with a large opening at the top and four pockets around the outside. I love terracotta pots and the way they show off the plants growing in them, but water evaporates more readily from unglazed versions, so monitor moisture in hot weather.

Primo pot is \$29.95, 18cm high and 38cm wide, with fixed saucer and three pockets. CottaSEAL herb pot is \$24.95, 27cm high and 28cm wide, with four pockets. Contact: northcotepottery.com.au, and also available at nurseries and hardware stores.

Planter Bags

These bags are made from tough waterproof material that is double stitched, are

surprisingly versatile and come in a variety of types. They are often marketed as strawberry or tomato bags. I find the bigger bags work better if they include the central tube with holes drilled in it, although this is not so important with the Yates vertical garden bags because they only have planting holes on one side.

I've been surprised at how prolifically the herbs have grown in these bags despite the small planting holes. My mint and lemon balm have done particularly well. These bags can be hung from decks, pergolas and walls. Some types will also sit on the ground.

Digger's hanging planter bags: 36cm high and 18cm wide; \$7. Contact: diggers.com.au; 03 5984 7900.

Green harvest tomato and herb planters: 40cm high and 20cm wide; \$14.95. Vertical planter bags, 70cm high and 22cm wide, set of 3; 11.95. Contact: greenharvest.com.au; 1800 681 014.

Pop-up planter: 60cm high and 30cm wide; \$19.95.

Contact: cornucopiaseeds.com.au; 03 5450 3100.

Yates vertical garden planter bags: 60cm high and 30 cm wide; flat on one side. About \$8 for a bag of three.

Contact: yates.com.au. Also available at nurseries and hardware stores.



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1: The pots that were trialled. Front (left to right): Primo, Bloom Master, Growstack. Back (left to right): Northcote COTTASEAL, Greenbo, Yates vertical garden bag. 2: Bloom Master pot with lemon balm, chives, rosemary, spearmint and basil. 3: Growstack pot with garlic chives, lemon balm, alpine strawberry, rosemary, plain leaf parsley, sweet marjoram. 4: Northcote pottery Primo herb pot, from left clockwise, Turkey thyme, onion chives, curly parsley, Greek basil, prostrate rosemary. 5: Yates vertical garden bag (planted much later than the other pots so the plants are not as developed). Top to bottom, oregano, common thyme, oregano, onion chives, Greek basil, spearmint.

PHOTOS: PENNY WOODWARD



Top: Northcote Pottery COTTaseal pot, from left clockwise, golden oregano, Greek basil, sweet marjoram, red sage, lemon thyme, curly parsley. **Above, left and right:** Fill pot with potting mix to just under the lowest holes, then poke the plants through the holes and spread the roots over the mix. Continue until you reach the top of the pot.

Planting

Multi-pocket pots are planted from the base up. Fill the pot to just below the level of the first holes. Poke the plant through the hole and spread the roots over the mix. Add more potting mix, firming down as you go, until you reach the next holes. Poke the next plants through in same way and continue until you reach the top. Finally, plant the top with two or more herbs.

Feeding

I added blood and bone to the potting mixture – about two small handfuls per pot – and the mix I used also contained some organic slow-release fertiliser. Once the pots were planted, I watered with seaweed emulsion to help overcome transplant shock and provide trace elements.

However, once potted, liquid fertilisers are the only reliable source of food that will reach all the plants.

You can use fish emulsion, liquid compost, liquid manure, worm juice and weed tea. Worm juice, in particular, is really good for pots and I keep a worm farm just so I have this nutritious food for my pots.

A nifty product perfect for adding liquid fertilisers to pots is a screw top with holes in it that fits on a soft-drink bottle (see photo on previous page). They are sold in hardware stores, garden centres and online. You can also just use a bottle without the screw top.

Position

All these pots dry out pretty quickly, so while a full-sun position is fine in winter, in hot dry weather move your pots to a spot where they get morning sun and afternoon shade. Rotate each pot 180° weekly so that all the herbs in the pot get some sun (alternatively, plant shade-loving herbs on one side and don't rotate). **OG**



TOP TIP

Herbs don't need as much fertiliser as many other plants, and are more strongly flavoured if not over-fed. Just feed them every few weeks.

Pot-friendly culinary herbs

- ✦ Alpine strawberry
- ✦ Chervil
- ✦ Coriander
- ✦ Ever-ready onions
- ✦ Greek and golden oregano
- ✦ Greek basil (a dwarf form)
- ✦ Hyssop
- ✦ Landcress
- ✦ Lemon balm
- ✦ Lemon, common and caraway thymes
- ✦ Mitsuba
- ✦ Onion and garlic chives
- ✦ Peppermint and spearmint
- ✦ Plain leaf and curly parsley
- ✦ Prostrate rosemary
- ✦ Red sage
- ✦ Sage, golden variegated
- ✦ Salad burnet
- ✦ Stevia
- ✦ Sweet and golden marjoram
- ✦ Violet
- ✦ Winter savory

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