



## Habitat in a pot

### Changing environments

You don't have to have a large backyard to create a habitat garden. Even if you only have a small backyard, courtyard, patio or balcony you can still plant a mix of native plants to attract local wildlife.

There are now numerous native shrubs, grasses, herbs and climbers that will happily grow in pots, along walls and fences or in compact spaces. In addition there is also a growing range of hybrid and cultivar varieties of larger native plants now available in dwarf and compact forms.

### How to create a habitat in a pot or small space

If you have a courtyard or small backyard with limited garden area try using a combination of direct planting into the ground and plants in various sized pots.

Some larger plant species including trees such as *Ficus* spp (figs), syzygiums (lilly pillies), grevilleas, callistemons and palms can be grown in pots to reduce and manage their size.

If you only have a balcony, use a combination of lightweight pots and containers for creative planting.

### Design ideas and things to consider

- Group pots together to create density. Pots grouped together will also provide more protection in exposed situations for sensitive plants and will help reduce water evaporation.



Pots can be used to create an illusion of a dense garden

- Incorporate hanging baskets and window boxes – hang baskets and pots from existing trees, attach hanging brackets to verandah posts, fences and walls. Don't be restricted to just your floor space or sitting pots on the ground. Be creative.
- Select a mix of plant species that will provide a range of food resources, including nectar, pollen, seed, fruit and berries.
- Select plants that are suited to your environmental conditions. If you have a west facing outdoor area that receives direct hot sun and winds don't choose plants that like cool shady locations. Similarly if you live on the coast and are regularly exposed to salt spray you will need to select plants that can tolerate being exposed to salt on their leaves and in their soil.

- Use a range of pot sizes and styles grouped together for a more creative look and to create height, structure and layers of foliage, flowers, seeds and fruit.



Architecturally designed pots can be a feature on a modern balcony

- Use combinations of different plants. The same theory for structural and floristic diversity for larger gardens can be used on a smaller scale to create habitat, for example;
  - three or four plants of the same species can be used to create a mass flowering or fruiting effect for visual aesthetics and increased opportunities to attract insects, native bees, butterflies and smaller birds
  - several of the same species of taller hardier plants such as lilly pillies, can be used at the rear to create a screen, shading or wind break
  - vines and climbing plants can be trained along fences and balcony rails for screening, privacy or shading
  - Smaller plants can then be added in front to create layers
- Attractive rocks and pebbles can be placed around pots on concrete or paved areas to create a natural look. You could even add a small twisted or gnarly log.



Native garden created in pots sitting on decorative gravel.

- Various mulch types can be placed on gardens and around pots to reduce water loss from the garden and pot soil and create habitat for invertebrates, skinks and geckoes.
- Include a bird bath or water feature amongst your pots. Note: only use water features that maintain a shallow pool of slow moving water to allow smaller birds, butterflies and insect species the opportunity to access the water but not get washed away or drown.

### Soil and potting mixes

Choose a good quality potting mix designed for Australian natives that is low in phosphorus, or good quality uncontaminated organic compost mix. Use a mixture that has good water holding capacity while also allowing adequate drainage, correct soil pH for each plant and an adequate supply of nutrients/fertiliser to support the plant through establishment and into the growing season.

It is not recommended to use soil from the garden in pots. You can introduce disease, weed seeds and fungi. The fine sediment in garden soil can become compacted and reduce drainage and oxygen availability to the plant.

### Pot requirements and considerations

When choosing your pots it is important to consider the following:

**Construction material** – will the construction material draw water from the soil e.g. unsealed concrete and terracotta. Is the pot made from heavy or light weight materials? How much will the pot weigh

when it is full of soil? Will it be able to be moved or will it be too heavy for the balcony?

**Drainage** – does the pot have sufficient drainage holes to prevent the plant and soil from becoming waterlogged? Where drainage holes are all located on the base of the pot and not on the corners you made need to sit pots on pot feet to assist drainage.

**Size** – choose a pot of appropriate size for each plant and location and that allows for future plant growth. If you only have a small space, don't select all large pots (or plants) or you will run out of room and will only be able to have a couple of pots.

**Design and shape** – select pots that are appropriately shaped for the growth habitat of the specific plant. It is not recommended to put tall growing trees into lightweight shallow pots that may be prone to being blown over. Select pots that will fit into the shape of the space you have and that can be easily grouped together with minimal wasted space.

**Colour and temperature** – the colour of the pot combined with the finished material can have a significant influence on the temperature of the soil in the pot. Particularly with plastic pots, the darker coloured pots cause the soil to become hotter and to dry out more quickly, while other containers such as white polystyrene boxes can actually help to insulate the soil and can be ideal for shallow rooted plants like ground covers and flowers.

**Pot saucers** – ensure you place an appropriately sized pot saucer under each of your pots and hanging baskets if you don't want dirty water running all over your deck, patio or balcony. Conversely don't leave plants sitting in a saucer full of water. Many plants don't like having wet feet and the stagnant water can provide opportunities for mosquito's to breed.

## Care and maintenance

While many native plants will happily grow in pots, just like any other plant in a pot, they will require a little extra care and attention. Native plants being grown in pots cannot get

all the nutrients, minerals and moisture that they need from the soil below them.

All plants grown in containers will need continuing care with regular watering, addition of nutrients, fertiliser developed specifically for Australian native plants and correct exposure to sunlight and shade.

## Watering

Potted plants will need watering more often during the growing seasons and warmer weather. During hot or windy weather, plants may need to be watered each day as they will dry out more quickly. As a general rule smaller pots, particularly those with large plants in them will need more regular watering, while larger pots can hold more moisture and may require watering less often.

## Pruning

Australian native plants can benefit from light trimming and tip pruning to maintain a bushy appearance and stop them from becoming too leggy and looking straggly. Regular tip pruning will also help to shape native plants and can promote flowering and growth.

## Advantages to growing in pots

- Reduced water usage (only water individual plant).
- Instant effect and landscape.
- Plant advanced plants for instant results.
- Choice of pot colours, designs and sizes to complement individual plant texture or flower colour or planting patterns.
- Ability to move plants around to achieve different effects or to respond to heat, cold, shading, screening.
- Can maintain and manage specific needs and soil types for difficult or fussy plants.
- Increased opportunities to grow vines or climbing plants vertically up walls and fences.
- Create a ready made garden on hardstand (concrete / paved) areas.
- No hard digging required

## Australian natives suitable for pots

Scientific Name	Common Name	Scientific Name	Common Name
<i>Acacia cognate</i> (cultivar)	Limelight	<i>Hibbertia scandens</i>	Snake vine, guinea flower
<i>Alpinia arundelliana</i>	Dwarf ginger	<i>Hoya australis</i>	Waxvine, common waxflower
<i>Anigozanthus</i> spp.	Kangaroo paw	<i>Kunzea</i> spp.	
<i>Archontophoenix cunninghamiana</i>	Piccabeen, bangalow palm	<i>Leptospermum</i> spp.	Tea tree
<i>Asplenium australasicum</i>	Birds nest fern	<i>Linospadix monostachyos</i>	Walking stick palm
<i>Atractocarpus chartaceus</i>	Narrow-leaved gardenia	<i>Livistona australis</i>	Cabbage-tree palm
<i>Austromyrtus</i>	Copper tops	<i>Livistona decora</i>	Weeping cabbage palm
<i>Austromyrtus dulcis</i>	Midyim, midgen berry	<i>Melaleuca thymifolia</i>	Thyme honey-myrtle
<i>Banksia ericifolia</i> (dwarf)	Little eric	<i>Melia azederach</i> (dwarf)	Dwarf white cedar
<i>Banksia spinulosa</i> (dwarf)	Birthday candles	<i>Myoporum</i> spp.	Creeping boobialla
<i>Banksia spinulosa</i> (cultivar)	Coastal cushion	<i>Myrsine howittiana</i>	Brush muttonwood
<i>Banksia spinulosa</i> (cultivar)	Honey pots	<i>Myrsine variabilis</i>	Muttonwood
<i>Callistemon</i> spp.	Bottlebrush	<i>Piper hederaceum</i>	Native pepper
<i>Cordyline stricta</i>	Slender palm lilly	<i>Podocarpus elatus</i>	Plum pine
<i>Cordyline terminalis</i>	Palm lilly	<i>Polyscias elegans</i>	Celery wood
<i>Dianella caerulea</i>	Blue flax-lilly	<i>Scaevola</i> spp.	Fan flower
<i>Dianella congesta</i>	Flax lilly	<i>Stenocarpus sinuatus</i>	Fire tree
<i>Ficus benjamina</i>	Benjamin tree	<i>Syzygium australe</i>	Scrub cherry
<i>Ficus hillii</i>	Hills weeping fig	<i>Syzygium australe</i> (cultivar)	Bush Christmas
<i>Ficus macrophylla</i>	Morton Bay fig	<i>Syzygium hemilamprum</i>	Blush satin ash
<i>Ficus obliqua</i>	Small-leaved fig	<i>Syzygium luehmannii</i>	Cherry satinash
<i>Ficus platypoda</i>	Desert fig, rock fig	<i>Syzygium australe</i> (cultivar)	Tiny Trev
<i>Graptophyllum ilicifolium</i>	Mount Blackwood holly	<i>Syzygium australe</i> (cultivar)	Aussie compact
<i>Grevillea</i> spp.	Grevillea, silky oak	<i>Viola hederacea</i>	Native violet
<i>Hardenbergia violacea</i>	Purple coral pea	<i>Xanthostemon chrysanthus</i>	Golden penda

### NOTE:

The accumulated weight of pot plants, soil, water and rocks can be quite heavy and potentially overload some balconies or raised decks. Always check the structural specifications and weight loading of your balcony before you begin. You may need to modify your design to reduce the total weight before you begin.

When planting vines and climbers against or adjacent to balcony railings or safety fences ensure that your plant choice and the growing habitat of that species is not too vigorous and will not produce strong thick or dense stems that could potentially allow children to climb over the railing or fence using the vine. Additionally, ensure that the vine will not become too heavy for the railing and potentially weaken or pull it down.