

Small Gardens, Big Impact

Maximizing ecological value and beauty in containers and small yards.

Small Spaces Really Matter

- The journey of the Monarch — looking for **Habitat**.
- Preserves and wild areas aren't enough. Bird decline is a signal of a failing ecosystem, and WE are part of it.
- Pollinators travel between unconnected habitats — your space is a **Stepping stone** in an invisible network.
- 90% of plant-eating insects can only eat specific **Native plants**.
- Only 5% of natives feed 75% of caterpillars — **Keystone Plants** do most of the work.
- YOU can control what you plant. A small number of right plants makes a huge impact.

Containers

Container types

- **Terracotta**: breathes, dries fast, heavy, freeze-cracks.
- **Glazed ceramic**: holds moisture better than terracotta, heavy, expensive.
- **Plastic**: cheap, lightweight, retains moisture, easy to make more drainage holes.
- **Bigger is better**.

Site conditions

- **Light**: can be somewhat controlled by where you put the pot.
- **Soil**: set up for plants that tolerate dry soils.
 - Use a high-quality potting soil; avoid “garden soil” or “top soil.”
 - Add amendments for better results: perlite, pumice, small gravel, COARSE sand.
- **DRAINAGE, DRAINAGE, DRAINAGE**.
 - Multiple drainage holes; lift pot off ground, don't put gravel in bottom.

Plant selection

- Drought tolerant.
- Fibrous or shallow roots (No long taproots).
- Small to medium in size (the pot will keep plants smaller).
- Keystone species — when in doubt plant **the aster family**.

Design

- Blooms throughout the season.
- Vary plant textures.
- Spill, fill, thrill.

Unique plants for containers

- Plants that need really good drainage: fame flower, prickly pear, June grass, prairie smoke.
- Aggressive plants.

Management

- **Water**: as needed, not on a set schedule — check with a finger. Water thoroughly until water comes out of the drainage holes, then allow to dry between waterings.
- **Fertilizer**: mostly not needed. If a planting is getting old or you see yellow leaves, add compost or organic, slow-release fertilizer. Mulch can add nutrients and keeps watering down.
- **Overwintering**: move pots so they contact the ground, even better if they are against a wall. Select plants also native to northern regions. Snow and rain generally keep plants watered in winter. You will probably lose some plants — that's normal.

Small Yards

Site conditions

- **Light**: FULL SUN = 6+ hrs, PART SHADE = 3–6 hrs, FULL SHADE = under 3 hrs.
- **Soil moisture & drainage**: WET = low spots, shady, compacted, standing water; DRY = slopes, sunny, loose soil or gravel
 - Ribbon test: crumble = good drainage; ribbons = poor drainage.
- **Microclimates**: south-facing walls are a heat sink (good for hot and dry); north sides hold consistent shade and moisture.
- **Plant where you spend time**.

Plant selection

- Small to medium plants.
- Upright / vase-shaped plants.
- Avoid aggressive plants — especially rhizomatous ones. Pick clumpers.

Design — make it look intentional

- Blooms throughout the season.
- Vary plant textures.
- Keep your species count restrained — 3 to 7.

Unify the planting

- **Plant in drifts**: groups of the same plants.
- **Matrix planting**: many of one grass with flowers throughout.

Trees and shrubs

- Woody plants give year-round structure and habitat; the best keystone plants are woody.
- **Small understory trees**: serviceberry, redbud, white fringetree.
- **Large shrubs**: buttonbush, viburnums, possumhaw.
- **Small shrubs**: beautyberry, New Jersey tea, shrubby St. John's wort.
- **Dwarf varieties**: hackberry, chinkapin oak, bald cypress.

Maintenance

- Small spaces are easier to maintain — especially if you site them where you spend time.

Recommended Plants for Small Spaces

C = container-friendly

S = small yard / in-ground

T / S / F = thrill / spill / fill (container role)

★ = keystone plant*

Season = peak interest

PLANT	C	S	ROLE	SEASON	★
barren strawberry <i>Waldsteinia fragarioides</i>	•	•	S	Spring	
bottlebrush blazing star <i>Liatriis mucronata</i>	•	•	T	Summer	★
butterfly weed <i>Asclepias tuberosa</i>		•	F	Summer	
calamint <i>Clinopodium arkansanum</i>	•	•	F	Summer	
cliff goldenrod <i>Solidago drummondii</i>	•		S	Fall	★
columbine <i>Aquilegia canadensis</i>	•	•	T	Spring	
cream wild indigo <i>Baptisia bracteata</i>		•	T	Spring	
diamondflowers <i>Stenaria nigricans</i>	•	•	F	Summer	
dittany <i>Cunila origanoides</i>	•	•	F	Fall	
dwarf crested iris <i>Iris cristata</i>	•	•	F	Spring	
Eastern beebalm <i>Monarda bradburiana</i>	•	•	F	Spring	
Eastern prickly pear <i>Opuntia humifusa (cespitosa)</i>	•	•	S	Summer	
elmleaf goldenrod <i>Soidago ulmifolia</i>	•	•	T	Summer/Fall	★
fall glade onion <i>Allium stellatum</i>	•	•	F	Fall	
false aloe <i>Manfreda virginica</i>	•	•	T	Summer	
fame flower <i>Phemeranthus calycinus</i>	•		F	Summer	
fringed bluestar <i>Amsonia ciliata</i>	•	•	T	Spring	
glade coneflower <i>Echniacea simulata</i>	•	•	T	Summer	
Indian pink <i>Spigelia marilandica</i>	•	•	T	Summer	
Jacob's ladder <i>Polemonium reptans</i>	•	•	F	Spring	
lanceleaf coreopsis <i>Coreopsis lanceolata</i>	•		F	Spring/Summer	★
leather flower <i>Clematis versicolor</i>	•	•	T	Spring/Summer	
little blue stem <i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i>	•	•	T	Summer/Fall	
maple-leaf alumroot <i>Heuchera villosa</i>	•	•	F	Fall	
Missouri coneflower <i>Rudbeckia missouriensis</i>	•	•	F	Summer	★
Missouri primrose <i>Oenothera macrocarpa</i>	•		S	Summer	
oak sedge <i>Carex albicans</i>	•	•	F	Spring	
Ohio horsemint <i>Blephilia cillata</i>	•	•	F	Spring/Summer	
palm sedge <i>Carex pensylvanica</i>	•	•	T	Spring/Summer	
Pennsylvania sedge <i>Carex pensylvanica</i>	•	•	F	Spring/Summer	
prairie alumroot <i>Heuchera richardsonii</i>	•	•	F	Spring/summer	
prairie dropseed <i>Sporobolus heterolepis</i>	•		T	Fall	
prairie Junegrass <i>Koeleria macrantha</i>	•		T	Spring	
purple love grass <i>Eragrostis spectabilis</i>	•	•	T	Fall	
purple poppy mallow <i>Callirhoe involucrata</i>	•		S	Summer	
pussytoes <i>Antennaria parlinii</i>	•	•	F	Spring	★
rose verbena <i>Glandularia canadensis</i>	•		S	Spring/Summer	
sand phlox <i>Phlox bifida</i>	•	•	S	Spring	
silky aster <i>Symphyotrichum sericeum</i>	•	•	F	Fall	★
small skullcap <i>Scutellaria parvula</i>	•	•	F	Summer	
spider milkweed <i>Asclepias viridus</i>		•	F	Summer	
star tickseed <i>Coreopsis pubescens</i>	•	•	T	Spring/Summer	★
stiffleaf aster <i>Ionactis linarifolius</i>	•	•	F	Fall	★
Western sunflower <i>Helianthus occidentalis</i>	•		T	Summer/Fall	★
white upland aster <i>Oligoneuron album</i>	•	•	F	Fall	★
wild ginger <i>Asarum canadense</i>	•	•	F	Spring/Summer	
wild pink <i>Silene caroliniana</i>	•	•	F	Spring	
wild stonecrop <i>Sedum ternatum</i>	•	•	S	Spring	
wild strawberry <i>Fragaria virginiana</i>	•		S	Spring/Summer	
wild sweet William <i>Phlox divaricata</i>	•		F	Spring	

*Keystone plant status determined by the National Wildlife Federation