

An AFFECTED PROVINCIAL'S SUPPLEMENTAL: *Terraria: Worlds Under Glass*

Terrariums are microcosms: self-contained, miniature worlds. These tabletop gardens require very little attention once they've been established, and are an ideal way to sustain humidity-loving plants that would otherwise perish in dry winter air. Hence, they are a wonderful horticultural solution for plant lovers who lack time, space, or the physical ability to engage in more conventional gardening.

Terrarium containers are glass, and can take just about any form: aquarium, bottle, brandy snifter, etc. Have you found the glass container of your dreams? Splendid! We will now clean the container very thoroughly with hot, soapy water. It is important to be sure that no bacteria or fungi spores take up residence in our enclosed miniature garden, as these little monsters can quickly wreak havoc in a moist, enclosed terrarium.

Next, we place a shallow layer of small pebbles in the bottom of the glass vessel; this will provide proper water drainage for your plants. To keep soil from settling down among the stones, place a bit of window screen, cheesecloth, or even a coffee filter over the stones. You'll be rewarded for this when you place your finished terrarium in the window, and notice passersby stopping to admire your stratification.

You will now require some activated charcoal, which can be purchased at most pet stores. This will help absorb any toxins that build up in the soil from decomposing organic matter. Place a thin layer of this activated charcoal over the cheesecloth/coffee filter.

Note that all of the aforementioned layers, including the soil, should only take up about a third of your terrarium's height.

We must now pause and consider our options before adding soil, as there are roughly four kinds of environments we can set up in our glass vessel, depending on the sorts of plants we wish to grow. Let us take a minute to review them:

Mosses require the simplest—and wettest—of all the terrarium environments. Non-vascular plants like moss require constant moisture, thriving in cool temperatures and moderate light. The wonderful thing about mosses is they can easily withstand being cut into bits to be placed through the small apertures of more unconventional vessels; hence, one can use containers with very dramatic shapes, presenting all sorts of sculptural opportunities for the aspiring terrariumist. Moss terrarium vessels can remain completely closed for remarkably long periods, often months at a time. Soil needs for moss terrariums are ridiculously simple: they love the acidity of moist, tightly packed peat. Gently press the clump of moss into the wet peat, close the lid, and enjoy.

Bog terrariums are almost as moist as moss terrariums, but often prefer a bit more ventilation. One may use native North American bog plants like Venus Flytrap, but keep in mind that temperate plants like American trumpet pitchers (genus *Sarracenia*) or Venus Flytraps (*Dionaea muscipula*) require a winter dormancy period. Temperate plants will eventually die if they aren't allowed to rest. Tropical bog plants, such as the Australian Lance-leaved Sundew (*Drosera adelaiae*), require no winter dormancy period, and will thrive year-round. Smaller species of Nepenthes pitcher plants, which are native to Southeast Asia, are also good candidates for bog terrariums. (Note that tropical carnivorous plants are not as fond of light and heat as their temperate cousins, who can take as much sunlight as cacti.)

Like mosses, bog plants prefer an acidic, low-nutrient substrate. Bog plants enjoy a moist mix of equal parts sand and peat moss, but long-grain sphagnum moss also works quite well, especially with Nepenthes. You may want to keep the lid of your bog terrarium slightly ajar in sunny windows, so as not to turn your plants into boiled cabbage. Be sure to keep the terrarium environment moist, as bog plants cannot survive drying out.

Small, slow-growing **tropical plants** that thrive on humidity and low indoor light are the most common plants used in terrariums. It's interesting that this should be the case, since this kind of terrarium tends to require the most care. Swedish Ivy, Maidenhair Fern, Wintergreen, Club Moss, African Violet, Polka Dot Plant and their ilk are known for their attractive foliage, and prefer moist environments with rich, loamy soil. Rich soil makes such terrariums a bit more susceptible to fungi and bacteria, so be careful not to get too much water on the leaves when watering them, as this will promote rot. Remove any dead leaves as soon as you can: fungi love dead plant matter. It's also a good idea to keep any foliage from touching the glass, as condensation will cause rot. A good rule of thumb: water the terrarium when condensation no longer forms on the glass. If the terrarium seems too wet, crack the lid open a bit to allow some evaporation.

When compared to conventional terrarium plants, **desert succulents** (cacti, sedum, etc) seem ludicrously simple to maintain, as they require little more than a sunny window and ventilation. Their dramatic forms, subtle colors and easy maintenance make them an ideal terrarium for beginners, or for those who are simply fed up with fussy tropicals. Let these stoic little fellows bask in as much sun as they like: they love it. Generally, you will not want to use

lids for xeric terrariums. Open glass vessels are best for desert plants, as they tend to create warm microclimates while allowing moisture to escape. The additional glass enclosure of a terrarium can mean a desert plant's survival in the depths of winter, as drafty windows can quickly kill a plant. Desert plants thrive on neglect: they require very little water, especially in winter, when they are largely dormant. Don't water them until spring, as they tend to rot very easily in a cold, damp Mid-Atlantic climate. That said, they enjoy a good drink during the height of summer, so don't be stingy with the watering can once they are wide-awake and in a blooming mood. In summer it's often a good idea to let their soil dry out between waterings—but that can happen quickly on a summer windowsill. Drainage is the main consideration when considering a good soil mix for desert plants. Equal parts potting soil, peat moss, and sterilized play sand is a reliably good mix.

A paper funnel is very useful for placing soil into your terrarium, as is a small spoon on a stick to move the soil about. When introducing your plants to their new home, it is helpful to use a wooden spoon or chopsticks to gently place the plants in a suitable composition.

Unless you want your terrarium to become a flowerpot, refrain from using fertilizer in your terrarium. Embrace dwarfism: it's not so bad, really.

It is recommended that you use distilled water in your terrariums, so as not to introduce harmful salts and chemicals found in regular tap water. Obviously, there is nowhere for these salts to go, so they will eventually build up and kill your pretty little plants—at which point you'll likely cause a scene, and no one needs to see that.

Tiny figurines and tchochkes are a fun way of transforming a jarful of plants into, say, an alien world, a tableau of the Late Triassic, or a Chinese scholar's garden. Terrariums are the very soul of brevity, and so it follows they should be the very soul of wit as well. Surprise us!

Enjoy your little worlds, my friends.