

BALCONY PLANTS¹

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Abstract. With the advent of a great number of condominiums in Florida, interest has developed in plants that thrive under the special conditions which may exist. Lists of plants are included for balconies of various exposures, and for those which have adverse wind, salt or shade conditions. Cultural considerations for balcony plants are summarized.

Condominium or apartment living in a multi-unit structure is a sensible alternative to urban sprawl for any area in which usable land is limited. Many people are glad to be free of the tyranny of maintaining a yard, but still enjoy the contact with the natural world that plants represent. In south Florida balconies are used throughout the year and are a natural place for growing plants. However, there are problems associated with some sites: Wind, salt spray, too much or too little sun, and these may cause disappointing results. The best defense against possible problems is to understand the limitations of the site, and to select plant material which is suited to the conditions and to the amount of care and attention that will be given to the plants.

Exposure

Light. The exposure of the balcony is obviously important in determining the amount and intensity of light that plants will receive. The east side of a building gets the morning sun. The first few hours are ideal for many plants, but by late morning the intensity of the light may begin to cause problems. South and west exposures may become very hot, and plants on these balconies must be able to tolerate high light intensities. While the light intensity in these exposures is relatively constant throughout the year, a north facing balcony may have an additional problem. Here the plants will be in shade for most of the year, and consequently will need to tolerate lower light levels, but may suddenly be exposed to strong sun in the middle of summer. In south Florida the tilt of the earth relative to the sun is such that during part of the year the sun actually appears to be north of vertical, and north facing balconies or garden areas that are not under an overhang may suddenly receive full sunlight resulting in serious burning of the plant's leaves.

Wind. Most balconies are subjected to much more wind than would be a similar garden at ground level. As a result, the water loss from plants and soil is much greater under these conditions and can take place very rapidly. Even dry growing plants will benefit from close attention to watering. The potential for wind damage must also be considered in connection with plants having large leaves or weak branches or for new arrivals to the balcony which may have been raised under the sheltered conditions of a nursery shadehouse.

Salt. Salt-laden breezes are even worse than normal wind. They may cause leaf burning on sensitive material, and may also build up salt levels in the soil damaging roots and interfering with water uptake.

Modifying the Environment

What can be done about these problems? First, it is necessary to evaluate the situation which exists on the balcony in question, and to choose plants that are best suited to these conditions. It may be possible to modify bad conditions either by structural changes to the balcony or by grouping plants so that tougher specimens shade or shelter more delicate types. Condominium regulations or the materials from which the balcony is made may limit the type of construction that is possible, so it is always wise to get the advice of an expert before beginning any structural change. Large plants will act as a windbreak for smaller material, and a group of plants modifies the environment around and between the individual containers making it much more congenial for each one's growth. Vines will give shade and shelter but a word of caution is due since the weight of topgrowth of a vine can increase rapidly and a vine can quickly outgrow the supporting structure.

Cultural Considerations

Most of the factors that contribute to success in growing plants in containers will apply in these situations, but there are some special considerations that come into play. The soil mix chosen must be free-draining but moisture-retentive so that the windy situation does not dry the plant too much between waterings. It must be dense enough to give the plant good support, but not so heavy that its weight poses a structural threat to the balcony. A good solution may be the ready-to-use soilless mixes (usually peat and perlite combinations) sold under a number of trade names. These are relatively light and clean and may be amended with one third (by volume) of builder's coarse sand to give them the density that will allow the roots to hold the plants upright.

Fertilization. There is usually an optimum size for a plant in a container, and once this has been reached, fertilizer is used solely to maintain the plant. It is tempting to continue the rate and type of fertilizer application previously used to increase growth but the resulting foliage will eventually have to be pruned. Remember that the recommendations on most fertilizer labels are for rates that will give maximum growth: a rule of thumb in setting rates is to cut these amounts to about one third or one quarter once plants have grown to the desired size.

Containers. As always with plants in pots, is it easier to judge watering if the container has drainage holes. But remember that water that comes out of these holes has to go somewhere, and if this "somewhere" is over the edge of the balcony onto the downstairs neighbor it may cause problems. Catching the water in a saucer is fine, but the saucer must then be emptied to avoid getting the pot waterlogged. Container size should be in proportion to the plant it contains. Rather than responding to a rapidly growing plant by moving it into a larger container, the growth can often be held back without harming the plant by purposely keeping it in a smaller container. The extreme case of this, of course, is the bonsai technique which, in skilled hands, can hold back the size of a plant for hundreds of years.

Watering. The problems of wind and exposure to sun will have a major influence on the watering schedule for

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Table 1. Plants recommended for use on balconies.

	Major woody plant	Shrub/herbaceous	Basket	Sun tolerant	Shade tolerant	Wind tolerant	Salt tolerant	Temporary display
<i>Agave attenuata</i> Salm-Dyck		x		x	x	x		
<i>Allamanda</i> spp.		x		x				
Yellow Allamanda								
<i>Aloe</i> spp.		x		x	x	x	x	
Aloe								
<i>Ananas comosus</i> (L.) Merrill		x		x		x	x	x
Pineapple								
<i>Anthurium</i> spp.		x			x			
<i>Araucaria bidwillii</i> Hook.	x			x	x	x	x	
Monkey Puzzle Tree								
<i>Araucaria heterophylla</i> (Salisb.) Franco	x			x	x	x	x	
Norfolk Island Pine								
<i>Ardisia escallonioides</i> Cham. & Schlecht.	x			x	x			
Marlberry								
<i>Asparagus densiflorus</i> (Kunth) Jessop 'Myers' & 'Sprengeri'		x		x		x	x	
Asparagus Fern								
<i>Aspidistra elatior</i> Blume		x		x	x			
Cast Iron Plant								
<i>Bambusa multiplex</i> Hort.	x			x		x		
Dwarf Bamboo								
<i>Beaucarnea recurvata</i> Lem.	x			x	x	x	x	
Ponytail								
<i>Begonia</i> spp.		x		some	some			x
<i>Bougainvillea</i> hybrids	x		x	x		x	x	
Bromeliads		x	some	some	some	some	some	x
<i>Bucida spinosa</i> (Northr.) Jennings	x			x		x	x	
Ming Tree								
<i>Caladium bicolor</i> (Ait.) Venten.		x		x	x			x
<i>Carissa macrocarpa</i> A. DC. Dwarf cultivars		x		x		x	x	
Natal Plum								
<i>Cereus</i> spp.	x			x		x	x	
<i>Chamaecyparis</i> spp.	x			x				x
Retinospora								
<i>Chlorophytum comosum</i> 'Vittatum' (Thunb.) Jacq.		x	x	x	x			x
Spider Plant								
<i>Chrysobalanus icaco</i> L.		x		x		x	x	
Cocoplum								
<i>X citrifolunella mitis</i> (Blanco) J. Ingram & H. E. Moore	x			x				
Calamondin								
<i>Clivia miniata</i> Regel		x			x			
<i>Clusia rosea</i> Jacq.	x			x	x	x	x	
Pitch Apple								
<i>Coccoloba wifera</i> (L.) L.	x			x		x	x	
Sea Grape								
<i>Codiaeum variegatum</i> (L.) Blume		x		x	some		x	
Croton								
<i>Coffea arabica</i> L.		x			x			
Coffee								
<i>Coleus</i>		x	x	x				x
<i>Conocarpus erectus</i> 'Sericeus' DC.	x			x		x	x	
Silver Buttonwood								
<i>Cordyline terminalis</i> (L.) Kunth		x		x	x			
Ti Plant								
<i>Crassula argentea</i> Thunb.		x		x				
Jade Plant								
<i>Crinum asiaticum</i> L.		x		x		x	x	
<i>Cupressus</i> spp.	x			x		x		x
<i>Curculigo capitulata</i> (Lour.) O. Kuntze		x			x			
Palm Grass								
Cycads	x			x		x		
<i>Cyperus haspan viviparus</i> Hort.		x		x		x		
<i>Cyrtomium falcatum</i> (L.f.) K. Presl		x	x		x			
Holly Fern								
<i>Dieffenbachia</i> spp.		x			x			
<i>Dracaena draco</i> L.	x			x	x	x	x	
<i>Dracaena fragrans</i> (L.) Ker-Gawl.	x			x	x	x	x	
<i>Dracaena marginata</i> Lam.	x			x	x	x	x	
<i>Dracaena reflexa</i> Lam.		x		x	x			
<i>Duranta repens</i> L.	x			x		x	x	
Golden Dewdrop								
<i>Elaeagnus philippinensis</i> Perr.	x			x		x	x	
Lingaro								

Table 1. Continued.

	Major woody plant	Shrub/herbaceous	Basket	Sun tolerant	Shade tolerant	Wind tolerant	Salt tolerant	Temporary display
<i>Euphorbia lactea</i> Roxb. Candelabra Cactus	x			x		x	x	
<i>Euphorbia lactea</i> 'Cristata' Brain Cactus	x			x		x	x	
<i>Euphorbia milii</i> Desmoul. Crown of Thorns	x		some	x		x	x	
<i>Fatsia japonica</i> (Thunb.) Decne. & Planch.		x		x	x			
<i>Ficus benjamina</i> L. Weeping Fig	x			x	x	x		
<i>Ficus carica</i> L. Fig	x			x		x		
<i>Ficus elastica</i> Hornem.	x			x	x	x		
<i>Ficus lyrata</i> Warb. Fiddleleaf Fig	x			x	x	x		
<i>Ficus nitida</i> Thunb. Cuban Laurel	x			x	x	x		
<i>Ficus pumila</i> L. Creeping Fig			x				x	
<i>Gardenia jasminoides</i> Ellis <i>Gardenia jasminoides</i> 'Radicans'	x	x	x	x		x		x
<i>Guaiacum officinale</i> L. Lignum Vitae	x			x		x	x	
<i>Heliconia psittacorum</i> L. f.		x		x				x
<i>Hibiscus rosa-sinensis</i> L.	x			x		x	x	
<i>Hoya carnosa</i> (L. f.) R. Br. Wax Flower		x	x	x	x			
<i>Impatiens</i> spp.	x	x	x	x			x	
<i>Ixora</i> spp.	x			x		x		
<i>Jacquinia armillaris</i> Jacq.	x			x		x	x	
<i>Jasminum</i> spp.		x	some	x		x		
<i>Jatropha integerrima</i> Jacq.	x			x		x	x	
<i>Jatropha podagrica</i> Hook. Gout Plant			x	x		x	x	
<i>Juniperus</i> spp.	x			x		x	x	
<i>Kalachoe</i> spp.		x		x		x	x	x
<i>Lantana montevidensis</i> (Spreng.) Brig. Dwarf Lantana		x	x	x		x	x	x
<i>Ligustrum</i> spp.	x			x	x	x		
<i>Malpighia glabra</i> L. Barbados Cherry	x			x	x	x	x	
<i>Monstera deliciosa</i> Liebm.		x			x	x		
<i>Nephrolepis</i> spp. Boston Fern		x	x	x	x	x		
<i>Nerium oleander</i> L. Oleander	x			x		x	x	
Orchids		x	x	x	x			
Palms	x			some	some	few		
<i>Pandanus</i> spp.	x			x		x	x	
<i>Peperomia</i> spp.		x	x		x			x
<i>Philodendron</i> spp.		x	x	x	x			x
<i>Pilea</i> spp.		x	x	x				x
<i>Platynerium</i> spp. Staghorn Ferns	x		x	x				
<i>Plumeria alba</i> L. Frangipani	x			x		x	x	
<i>Podocarpus</i> spp.	x			x	x	x		
<i>Poinsettia pulcherrima</i> (Klotzsch) Graham Poinsettia	x			x	x			x
<i>Polypodium</i> spp.		x	x	x	x			x
<i>Polyscias</i> spp. Aralia	x			x	x			
<i>Portulacaria afra</i> (L.) Jacq.		x		x	x	x	x	
<i>Rhoeo spathacea</i> (Swartz) Stearn Moses in the Bulrushes		x	x	x	x	x	x	
<i>Russelia equisetiformis</i> Schlecht. & Cham. Firecracker Plant		x	x	x	x	x	x	
<i>Sansevieria</i> spp.		x		x	x	x	x	
<i>Schefflera actinophylla</i> (Endl.) Harms Queensland Umbrella	x			x	x			
<i>Schefflera arboricola</i> (Hay.) Kanehira Dwarf Schefflera		x		x	x	x		
<i>Scindapsus (Epipremnum) aureus</i> (Linden & André) Engl.		x	x	x	x			

Table 1. Continued.

	Major woody plant	Shrub/herbaceous	Basket	Sun tolerant	Shade tolerant	Wind tolerant	Salt tolerant	Temporary display
<i>Sedum</i> spp.		x	x	x		x		x
<i>Solandra</i> spp.	x			x		x	x	
Golden Chalice Vine								
<i>Spathiphyllum</i> cultivars		x		x	x			
Peace Lily								
<i>Spironema fragrans</i> Lindl.		x	x	x	x	x		
<i>Stapelia</i> spp.		x	x	x	x	x	x	
<i>Strelitzia reginae</i> Ait.		x		x		x		
Bird of Paradise								
<i>Syngonium podophyllum</i> Schott.		x	x		x			x
<i>Turnera ulmifolia</i> L.		x		x	x	x	x	x
Yellow Alder								
<i>Yucca elephantipes</i> Regel	x			x	x	x	x	
Soft Tip Yucca								
<i>Zebrina pendula</i> Schnizl.		x	x	x	x	x		x
Wandering Jew								

a balcony. The size of a plant relative to its pot, the leafiness and type of leaf tissue, and the temperature will all affect the plant's needs for water, and only careful observation will show if watering is being done properly.

Pests and diseases. Even the highest terraces seem to get a plentiful supply of insect pests. Most of these probably come in on new plants that are added to the collection, and this aspect of pest control—careful inspection of all new material and perhaps even isolation for a time—is very important. Only a limited number of agricultural chemicals are labeled for use by homeowners, but those available for use inside the house are “legal” and equally effective on terraces and balconies.

Choice of Plants

Short-term plants. One factor which must be considered is the fact that many people divide their year between Florida and some other state. Balcony plants in this situation may be a liability if they are to be maintained while the owner is away. One possible alternative is to use a succession of plants bought in full bloom, or full size, which are replaced by others when they are past their best. Flowering pot plants are also useful to add excitement to a ‘permanent’ planting, which can often be designed with spaces intended for short-lived plants.

Useful plants. One final consideration is the possibility of growing a number of fruits and vegetables in containers, which may be very suitable for terrace culture. Herbs and useful plants such as the aloe seem particularly appropriate.

The lists which follow could have been expanded to include any plant that will grow in a pot. The species included are all relatively free of problems. The list is coded to indicate exposure and other information to assist in the selection of plants. More detailed descriptions of the plants may be found in standard references such as those cited (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7).

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