Container gardens are quite popular today and an attractive alternative to in-ground plantings. Portability is a key feature for container gardening. Containers can be moved to a different location for more or less sun, shade, water and protection from weather and seasonal changes. This enables tropical plants to be grown in areas that receive freezing weather. If you place larger containers on wheeled plant stands, it’s even easier to move inside your garage, lanai, to your front porch or indoors. Containers help you control irrigation according to the needs of the plants. They encourage experimenting where you can try a wide variety of plant materials and controlled climates.

Selecting the container itself is an important decision. Porous containers, unglazed clay pots, terra cotta and wood, dry out faster than non-porous containers. Non-porous pots, glazed, plastic and metal, retain soil moisture better than porous pots which can be a good or bad thing depending on your watering habits. Most plants die from over versus under watering. Make sure there is a drainage hole in the bottom of the pot. If there isn’t one, you can use Styrofoam packing peanuts in the bottom of the pot to elevate the plant roots above the excess moisture in the bottom. That will also make the pot lighter using those ‘peanuts’ versus soil and easier to move.
Plastic containers are less expensive, lighter and easier to clean than porous pots. Many plastic pots on the market today have been manufactured to look like terra cotta, so they are more attractive than in the past. Metal containers, brass, copper or aluminum, generally provide drainage holes in the bottom so the soil drains properly. Wire baskets are another container alternative and require a liner to hold the soil in place. Liners include Sphagnum moss, coco-fiber and recycled carpet pads.

The nine principles of the Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ Program hold true for container planting as they do for landscape beds. One of the best aspects of container gardening is the flexibility that it offers. You can achieve Right Plant-Right Place, the first and foremost of the nine principles, with a container even when the conditions of your landscape do not match the plant's needs. For instance, if a plant is acid-loving, but your soil pH is alkaline, a container could be an easy solution. Add a soil amendment that acidifies the container soil, and you have the Right Plant in the Right Place!

Locate sun-loving plants in the sun. If the soil is moist, don’t water. Use slow release fertilizers that do not leach through the soil after irrigation or rain. Manage pests responsibly by using environmentally-friendly products and spot treat as needed. Select plants that attract wildlife so you can enjoy butterflies and hummingbirds.

Consider grouping several plants with the same requirements together to create attractive combinations. These requirements include light, water, soil texture and pH. Also consider the mature size so you are not over or under-planting. Plants can be combined with an eye to color schemes, contrasting textures and different forms. Be sure to consider proportion when creating plant combinations. Try to have at least one plant that is as tall the container. Finally, group several containers together to create visual impact.

For additional information on container garden designs and plants for visual impacts, please see “Container Gardens for Outdoor Spaces” by Gary W. Knox: http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ep326.

As always, follow the landscape or architectural control procedures in your deed restrictions before making changes. For assistance with horticultural questions, call the Hillsborough County Extension Service, 5339 County Road 579, Seffner, FL 33584 or call: 813-744-5519. More gardening information is available at http://hillsborough.extension.ufl.edu and http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu.