

Phyllis Alexander

## How to Plant a Terrarium

Planting a terrarium is an enjoyable way to bring the natural world indoors. We can create a miniature landscape existing in a world of glass with some sunlight and minimal intervention. The little ecosystem will thrive on its own, with little or no watering needed, as water will condense on the glass during the day, and then during the cooler evening, run down the sides into the soil thus watering the plants.

During the Victorian period in Europe, it became fashionable for the middle class to place terrariums filled with ferns and rare plants, such as orchids in their drawing rooms. Plants grew well in these humid environments, protected from the polluted air of the cities. Some were quite elaborate, containing birds beside plants inside the glass structures. In the United States, terrarium culture is believed to have originated in New England where housewives placed squawberry (Partridge berry, *Mitchella repens*) plants in hand-blown glass bowls. These were quite decorative, with red berries contrasting against the green foliage. We sometimes still see these berry bowls at sales around holiday time. Today we grow plants in terrariums to protect them from the hot, dry air in modern homes.

The modern terrarium as we know it, is credited to Nathaniel Ward, a medical doctor, living in London during the 1800's. He accidentally created what was called a "Wardian Case" in a sealed glass bottle with some damp leaf mold to house the pupa of a sphinx moth. The moth never flew, but Dr. Ward observed the growth of tiny ferns and grasses that sprouted in the enclosure. He published a book, "On the Growth of Plants in Closely Glazed Cases" in 1842. This invention led to the use of the Wardian Case, forerunner to the terrarium.

Here are directions for creating your own miniature garden:

### Materials needed:

1. Glass Container or Wardian Case,
2. Stones (to use as part of planting design),
3. Soil -soilless mix, preferably one with no perlite,
4. Charcoal - to keep soil sweet and neutralize acids,
5. Gravel - coarse grade used for drainage layer,
6. Instruments for planting - small clippers, small paint brush, spray bottle (mister)
7. Chopstick with cork on the end to tamp plants down,
8. Rocks or pieces of wood to add to the miniature landscape.

## Procedure:

Make sure the container is clean and dry. Place a ½ inch layer of gravel in the bottom of the container, and sprinkle the gravel layer with a thin layer of charcoal. Place a layer of damp soil on top of the charcoal only to the depth needed to cover the root ball of plant material. If using stones or pieces of wood in your design, place them in now. Place your plants (groomed before placement) in the terrarium allowing enough space for each to grow. Clean the leaves with your small paint brush and water the plants with a mister or turkey baster. Apply a top dressing such as stones or fine wood chips, and clean the sides of the container with the spray bottle, wiping down with a paper towel. Last, cover the container.

## Maintaining the terrarium or Wardian Case:

**Light:** No direct sunlight unless removed from the window; artificial light is fine. Light from a north window is ideal.

**Water:** Condensation on the glass is normal; droplets on the glass mean too much moisture. Remove cover and let dry for a day. Once the moisture balance is established, watering will be infrequent. Water when needed using a mister.

**Feeding:** Fertilizer is seldom needed. Once or twice a year with ¼ strength should suffice.

**Grooming:** Encourage bushy plants by cutting or pinching growing tips. Remove dead leaves or flowers. Plants may be trimmed or shaped as desired. Algae on the glass may be cleaned off with a cotton swab dipped in alcohol.

## Some plant suggestions for your terrarium:

The best plants for your terrarium are anything that's miniature and doesn't need a lot of pruning to keep it in check. Try to vary your plants in height and color for interest. Small terrarium plants can be found at Cherry Blossom florist in Littleton, and Riff's in Lancaster. The big box stores also contain small plants, and terrarium plants can be ordered on-line from Etsy, amazon, Rob's Violets, The Violet Barn, and Logees catalog.

Here are some plant suggestions, I found on a computer search, however there are many more plants you can use. The only plants you do not want are cacti and other succulents that might find the terrarium too humid.

Three to five plants will work in most terraria, but depending on the terrarium size you might want to use a few more. You might also want to add a few tchothkes, such as a tiny gnome or birdbath.

1. Miniature African violet. A blooming violet plant is pretty in your terrarium, and a miniature sinningia is also attractive. Sinningias are gesneriads, in the same family as African violets, and they can be found at Rob's Violets or the Violet barn. Sinningias grow from a small corm.
2. Creeping fig (*Ficus pumila*)
3. Air plant (*Tillandsia*)
4. Jewel orchid - These have interesting foliage and small blossoms (*Ludisia*)
5. Spike moss (*Salaginella*) These do very well in terrariums because they love high humidity).
6. Baby's tears (*Soleirolia soleirolii*)
7. Prayer plant - This plant has colorful foliage. It's recommended for larger terrariums. (*Maranta*).
8. Polka Dot Plant (*Hypoestes*) This plant has red, pink, or white spotted foliage, and it loves humidity . The plant is slow growing but it may become leggy. Prune if it does.
9. Peacock plant (*Calathea*) This plant is fussy to grow outside a terrarium because it loves humidity. Like the Prayer plant, it requires a larger terrarium.
10. Nerve plant (*Fittonia*) A compact grower with interesting foliage in white, red, or pink.
11. Maidenhair fern (*Adiantum* spp.) This is very fussy in dry interiors but it thrives in a moist environment. It has delicate, lacy foliage.
12. Bird's nest fern (*Asplenium*) Like Maidenhair it loves humidity.
13. Begonia (*Begonia* spp) Miniature begonias are beautiful in terrariums with their patterned leaves and small flowers.
14. Asparagus fern (*Asparagus setaceus*) This plant has tiny horns- wear gloves when planting. The leaves are delicate and wispy.

15. Parlor palm (*Chamaedorea elegans*). This is a small parlor palm that will give some contrast of height in the terrarium. It will also add a tropical vibe.

*(This list was found on a computer search).*