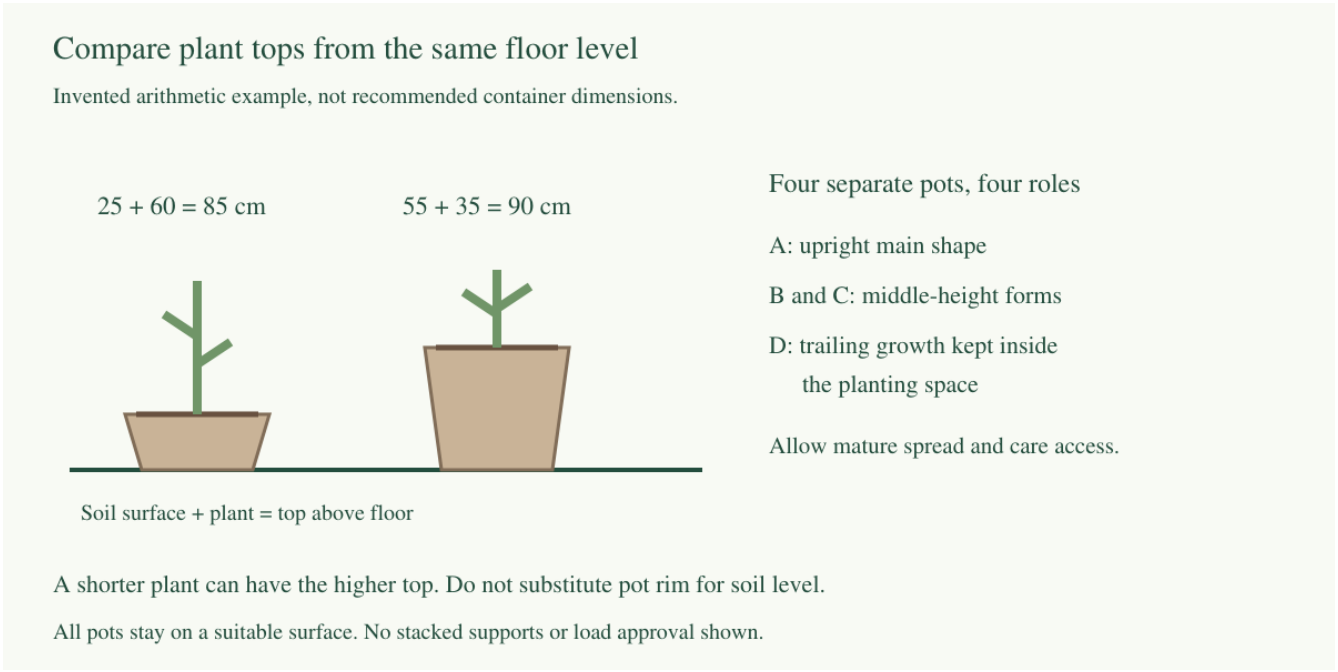
Use Height Layers in a Four-Pot Garden

Steadleaf Press



A practical growing guide with observation tools and original planning examples.

Four pots can make a small garden feel settled and generous without filling every available inch. A useful starting arrangement is one taller plant, two middle-height plants and one that softens a pot edge. Give each plant room to reach its expected size, then adjust the group around light, access and the way you use the space.

The aim is a garden you can see and care for comfortably. Height comes from the plants and suitable containers. You do not need shelves, stacked crates, overturned pots or improvised platforms.

Give each pot a job

Think of the four pots as a small group rather than four separate purchases.

- **A, the tall pot:** carries the main upright shape. “Tall” means taller than its companions, not as tall as the site can possibly accommodate.

- **B, the middle pot:** makes the transition from the tall plant to the front of the group.

- **C, the second middle pot:** repeats a leaf shape, flower colour or plant already used, so the arrangement feels connected.

- **D, the trailing pot:** brings some growth over its own edge, into space reserved for planting rather than onto a walking route.

The RHS describes upright, bushy and trailing forms as useful components of summer containers. You can borrow that idea across separate pots, while keeping each plant's growing needs in view. RHS, Containers: summer selection

A compact mound can replace a trailer when there is no safe place for hanging stems. If the site suits only low plants, make the height changes modest.

Read the site before choosing the tall plant

Stand where you will usually see the group. This might be a kitchen window, a chair or the approach to the door. Mark that viewpoint on your plan. Then walk around the proposed garden and note other important views.

A group seen mainly from one side can place its taller plant toward the rear. A group seen from every side may work better with the taller plant nearer its centre. This follows the RHS's advice to arrange container plants for their viewing angles. Neither position overrides the plants' need for suitable light. RHS, How to plant up a container

Use this site record before shopping:

- Main viewpoint and usual viewing height:

- Other places from which the group will be seen:

- Where direct sun reaches each proposed pot position:

- Times when a wall, roof or neighbouring plant shades the area:

- Exposed or gusty corners observed:

- Door movement, walking space and drainage points to keep clear:

- Place from which each pot can be watered and inspected:

Observe the actual location rather than assuming that every pot on the same patio gets identical conditions. Revisit the plan if the light changes substantially through the season.

Choose plants by their eventual shape

A young plant's nursery size is a poor guide to its place in the finished arrangement. Record its expected height and spread, growth habit, light needs, watering requirements and likely need for support. Check the named variety, not just a broad plant group.

Rutgers Cooperative Extension advises matching container plants to the site and to similar growing requirements when they share a container. It also highlights a wide container base for a tall plant and enough clearance for cascading growth. Rutgers, Outdoor Container Gardening with Flowering and Foliage Plants

For this four-pot plan, keeping plants in separate containers lets you check and water them individually. It does not make an unsuitable plant suitable for the site. Reject a choice whose mature spread would take over the route or whose height creates a difficult exposed arrangement.

Copy this card for A, B, C and D:

Pot letter and intended job:

Exact plant name and variety:

Expected plant height and spread, with information source; soil-surface height above the floor; resulting top height above the floor:

Container size and shape needed:

Sun, moisture and drainage needs:

Flowering or foliage season:

Space needed to water, inspect and eventually repot:

Reason this plant fits this position:

Unresolved question before buying:

Leave the last line visible. “Need to check mature spread” is a useful shopping pause, not a detail to fill in after planting.

Draw the tall-middle-trailing arrangement

Make two quick sketches: a top view for space and a front view for height. Use paper circles cut to a consistent scale for the pots. Around each circle, add a larger dotted outline for its anticipated foliage. For a trailer, draw an arrow showing where growth is allowed to fall.

Here is an illustrative arrangement seen mainly from the front. It is not a spacing prescription.

Top-view sketch, not to scale

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Rear planting boundary
        (A tall)
                    (B middle)       (C middle)
(D trailing) >>> space for trailing growth
Planting edge
Clear walking and care area
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The arrow points into the planting area. Leave reachable gaps around the pots; the drawing does not set their distances.

Front-view sketch

A provides the highest outline. B and C form two lower, slightly different outlines. Compare their tops from the same floor level: soil-surface height above the floor plus plant height above that soil surface. For example, a 60 cm plant whose soil surface is 25 cm above the floor reaches 85 cm; a 35 cm plant in a container with its soil surface 55 cm above the floor reaches 90 cm. These invented measurements show why the shorter plant can make the taller outline. Do not add the full pot height if the soil sits below its rim. D's foliage falls only within the planting area, and all four containers stand on the same suitable surface.

Now mark three things on your own drawing:

1. An arrow from the main viewpoint.

2. A sun arrow showing the direction that matters at the site.

3. A hand symbol beside every pot rim you need to reach.

If a hand symbol is trapped behind dense foliage, spread or simplify the group. If the tall plant would shade a sun-loving companion, change their positions or choose a different plant.

Work through a four-pot example

Imagine a sheltered, ground-level patio with a planting area beside a wall and a separate route to the door. The gardener wants flowers near a chair and does not want to reach across one plant to water another.

Their candidate records describe four plants with these expected habits:

- A: an upright form, around 60 centimetres tall and 35 centimetres wide.

- B: a rounded form, around 35 centimetres tall and wide.

- C: another middle-height form, around 30 centimetres tall and 40 centimetres wide.

- D: a low plant with an expected trailing reach of around 25 centimetres.

These are invented planning inputs, not recommended dimensions or a height formula. A real gardener would replace them with information for the plants and containers under consideration.

On the first sketch, A sits directly in front of B. From the chair, B disappears. The gardener moves B slightly to one side, then checks the sun direction. B now has a better view and a workable position without borrowing space from the door route.

D initially faces the walking space. Its trailing arrow crosses the route, so the gardener moves the proposed pot farther inside the planting area and redraws its expected spread. Turning a pot alone does not guarantee that future stems will grow only inward. If the full likely spread cannot stay clear of the route, a compact mound replaces the trailer. C remains reachable from the open side. The gaps may look generous while the plants are young; their mature foliage outlines explain why the space is needed.

Before committing, the gardener checks that the chosen containers suit their plants and fit the available area. If the combined outlines do not fit, the next move is to choose smaller plants or use fewer pots. Squeezing the circles closer together would hide the problem on paper.

Check the arrangement in everyday use

Place empty containers in the proposed positions before filling them, where it is safe to do so. Do not use empty pots as a wind-stability test. This is simply a way to see the footprint and practise reaching each position.

Ask:

- Can I reach every pot rim without leaning over another plant?

- Can I inspect the back of each plant from a safe position?

- Does each plant have room for its expected spread?

- Is trailing growth directed away from feet, wheels, doors and drains?

- Can I move safely through the space while carrying a watering can?

- Is the tall plant appropriate for the site's exposure?

- Could a smaller or lower arrangement do the same job more easily?

Do not tie the group to a balcony railing or add heavy ballast to solve a design problem. For a balcony, obtain the applicable placement and loading guidance before arranging filled containers.

Review as the plants grow

Return to the same viewpoint after a noticeable flush of growth. Compare the actual outline with the sketch. Check care access again, not just the appearance.

If one plant begins to dominate, first decide whether its position is wrong or whether it was the wrong plant for the space. Prune only in a way suited to that plant. Repeatedly cutting a naturally large plant to force it into a tiny gap can turn a simple display into constant work.

Keep one short note: “Next change and why.” For example: “Choose a more compact middle plant next season; this one blocks access to A.” The best layer is the one that still works when the garden is growing well.

Sources and scope

- RHS, Containers: summer selection: upright, bushy and trailing forms in seasonal containers.

- RHS, How to plant up a container: container suitability and arrangement for viewing angles.

- Rutgers Cooperative Extension, Outdoor Container Gardening with Flowering and Foliage Plants: plant compatibility, container stability and grouped design.

Sources rechecked 8 November 2026. The cards, sketch instructions, floor-level height comparison and worked example are original planning tools. This guide covers a freestanding four-pot layout, not structural design, balcony loading approval or a universal plant-height ratio. Local conditions and the requirements of the chosen plants govern the finished arrangement.