

Patio Container Drainage Troubleshooting Checklist

A repeatable inspection for ordinary draining pots on patios and balconies. No fixed watering schedule or drainage-time rule.

Start with the system

A true self-watering planter uses a designed reservoir: follow its overflow and filling instructions. This worksheet is not for aquatic plant containers.

1. Inspect before changing anything

- ☐ Identify the growing pot. Check its drainage openings, not only the decorative outer pot.
- ☐ Inspect the outlets for debris, a liner, or roots. Do not pull roots through a hole.
- ☐ Check that the base or support leaves the outlets open and the pot stable.
- ☐ Empty collected water from the saucer or outer pot after drainage and rain.
- ☐ Check moisture below the surface before watering; use the plant's needs and site conditions.
- ☐ Look for compacted mix or crowded roots if drainage repeatedly behaves unusually.

2. Match the observation to an inspection

Observation	Check next	Next step
Water sits on top or bypasses the mix	Dry, compacted or hard-to-wet mix	Water gently in stages. Inspect the mix if the pattern persists.
Drainage repeatedly seems slow	Outlet, base clearance, mix and roots	Clear accessible debris; assess mix or root crowding before repotting.
Pot drains into standing water	Saucer or decorative outer pot	Empty the collected water and keep the growing pot above it.
Leaves yellow or wilt while mix is wet	Moisture, drainage, roots and plant needs	Do not assume the symptom proves poor drainage or a need for more water.
Runoff reaches a neighbor or walkway	Watering pace, catch tray and building rules	Capture short-term overflow in a removable tray; empty it safely.

3. Avoid the shortcut

Do not add a gravel layer beneath the potting mix to improve drainage. Keep the exit path open, use container-appropriate mix and make watering decisions for the plant.

Sources: Illinois Extension, Container Drainage Options; University of Minnesota Extension, Fertilizing and watering container plants.

Full guide and source links: naturefitshere.com/guides/patio-container-drainage-troubleshooting-checklist