

Terrarium- your own small living world...

A terrarium is a great way to bring a little bit of living outdoors (mostly plants) indoors in an enclosed container, and to enjoy it closely over time.

Start with a container that is a good size for where you want to keep it (you'll want the terrarium indoors with at least a little indirect sunlight, and at regular room temperature). Choose a container that you can see through to observe what's in your terrarium. Glass is easier to look through, but clear plastic works fine. It should have a screw on lid or other snug fitting closure. A pickle or mayonnaise jar, or a clear plastic deli container (like for salads), are two examples. Wash it clean.

Figure a way to make sure your terrarium doesn't roll around or roll off the spot you will be keeping it.

Take your container outdoors. Put a little layer of clean sand or fine gravel in the bottom for drainage. Half an inch or so should be fine; that depends on the size of your terrarium.

Go to a moisty, woody spot. Find a place with nice small plants growing. Scoop up a trowel of dirt and small growing plants that will fit in your container, and will be an ok height. Moss is nice since it has lots of interesting parts, usually a couple of kinds, and sometimes other small plants growing with it. Slide the trowel under and get the moss and the layer of dirt that hold the plants' roots. It's ok to get some rotting wood, a small stick, seeds, dead leaf, etc. It's also ok if you find that you scooped up a worm or spider or other small creature (but if you don't want those in your terrarium, just brush them away).

Slide the specimen into your container and settle it gently into the layer of sand, so the root parts are not exposed (if they dry out the plants will probably die). Don't overfill the container;

Add anything else you want—a nice pebble or two, a toy dinosaur, a few marbles, a stick.

Give the inside a few sprays of water using a clean spray bottle, or just flick water in with your fingertips.

Put the lid or cover on your terrarium. Set it in the spot you chose for it.

Watch what happens. Maybe you'll see a small animal or two inside it. What do they do? Over several days you may see the moss or other plants grow or change. Why do they do that? Maybe something new will sprout and start to grow. If something in the terrarium dies, what happens to it?

A terrarium is different from an open topped planting because it is closed up and the moisture is kept inside. What happens with moisture in the terrarium? Do you see it collect anywhere? Where does it show? Does this change at different times of day? Does it change if the terrarium warms up from some sunlight?

Give the terrarium a misting every day or two so that it doesn't dry out. If it seems too wet, you can leave the lid open for a few hours—BUT don't do this if you know there are crawling creature in it; to keep them in you can stretch a piece of thin cloth or nylon stocking across the opening and hold it with a rubber band. Once your terrarium dries out a little, return to using the regular lid.

Sometimes a terrarium might get all moldy our fungus-y with white fibers or slime. Or if it dries out all the plants may die. If this happens, you can watch it for a little longer, to see what happens. But then just dump it outdoors and start over.

Every terrarium is different and might contain a new surprise.

If you do have a small creature in the terrarium, it is not likely to live very long, since there may not be the right food or living spot for it. A terrarium like this is NOT a good place to put an animal. But if you accidentally scooped one into your terrarium you can watch it a while and see what you learn. Or you can take the terrarium outdoors and return the animal back into the wild habitat.

One very fun thing if you have a terrarium going during the winter is to sniff it when you have it open for misting. The smell is special—not what we usually smell when the real outdoors is cold and frozen. The small outdoors in the terrarium is like a different season!

Sam Cornelius
Kids Outdoors Otsego

kidsoutdoorsotsego@gmail.com

