

Contain Yourself: Creating a Unique Potted Garden



When it comes to gardening, we have an abundance of choices — a blessing that sometimes becomes a curse. Each spring, we are ready to create a unique and beautiful container garden, but can become overwhelmed by the myriad of interesting pots and plants that call to us. Following a trip to the nursery, we may long for the day when we just filled our pots with a dracaena spike in the center, geraniums or petunias around it and a vinca vine or two trailing down the side. Ah, the simplicity of the past.

In the following pages, we will help you focus on what you like and will work for you, as well as provide tips for creating a container garden that you can enjoy throughout our long growing season.

A Trip Outside – And to the Bookstore

Tour your yard. To begin, grab a notebook and pen and tour your yard to see where potted plants would beautify your landscape.

- What color and style is your house?
- Does your entryway need more color to welcome visitors?
- Does the hardscape of a patio, deck or retaining wall need softening?
- Do you want to screen out an undesirable view?
- Do you want to add height or interest to a boring area of your yard or garden?
- Which areas are in the sun and which are in shade?
- Which areas are exposed to the wind and which are sheltered from it?

Gather ideas. Once you have an idea of where you want to place some containers, head to a bookstore or library and check out some of the many books on container gardening.

In the spring, you can also visit nurseries to see what's growing in their containers. Note how containers are grouped together and what plant combinations catch your eye. Do you like a harmonious blend of similar plants and colors or dynamic contrasts of plant and leaf height, textures and hues?

If you are making lists from gardening books and magazine articles, be aware that many suggest plants that thrive in cooler climates but may not stand up to our scorching summers. Unless you want to change your pots with each season, you might have to substitute plant varieties that have a similar look but survive better here in Heat Zone 7.

Select Your Containers

To minimize the amount of watering you'll have to do, use the largest containers possible, based on the size of your site and your ability to lift and store them. Generally, you don't want anything smaller than a 14-inch or 16-inch pot, especially in a sunny, windy location. All pots need drainage holes.

Use the following guidelines to find the type of pot that will work best for you.

Pot Style	Pros	Cons
Terra-cotta	Classic, attractive, affordable, beautiful patina with age	Heavy, fragile, porous (needs extra watering), cracks in winter
Plastic	Lightweight, durable, affordable	Less attractive, blows over in wind
Ceramic	Attractive, many colors	Fragile, costly, often no drainage
Wood	Affordable, can build yourself	Decays, not as attractive
Fiberglass	Lightweight, mimics natural materials	Costly
Hypertufa	Popular look, can make yourself	Heavy, cracks in winter

Preparing the Container

Choosing a growing medium is easy. Ignore any bags that contain soil in favor of a soil-less potting mix. Mixes of peat, bark and either perlite or vermiculite are lighter than soil and hold water and oxygen for maximum plant growth. They have the added benefit of being sterile (weed and disease free). Many mixes now contain slow-release fertilizers, which feed your plants throughout the summer.

1. When using large pots, move them to their permanent location before filling them.
2. Prop containers off wood and concrete surfaces to prevent rot and/or staining.
3. Cover the drainage hole with a coffee filter or piece of newspaper to prevent the potting mix from falling out. Don't cover it with anything that will inhibit drainage.
4. Fill your containers with the potting mix, shaking the pot to fill in all the air spaces. Leave a one- to two-inch space between the soil level and the top of the pot to make watering easier. Do not add a filler of rock gravel or Styrofoam peanuts in the bottom of large pots. The soil should be as deep as possible in order to promote deep root growth and minimize watering needs.
5. When using saucers under pots, drain excess water to deter mosquito breeding.

Planting

Once your pots are ready, the fun of filling them begins. Except for formal designs, where restraint might call for a single clipped shrub or vertical topiary, the key word to remember is **FILL**. The best-looking containers are those packed with plants.

Deciding which plants to include is part art and part science ... and part borrowing ideas from others. Choose individual plants that delight as well as contribute to the overall beauty of the pot. Your personal taste can be guided by a few basic design principles.

- ✓ **Consider your pot.** Generally, plants in containers should not be more than one and a half times the height and width of the pot.
- ✓ **Vary your plant shapes.** Remember that spike-geranium-vinca-vine-filled pot mentioned earlier? One reason for its popularity is that it contained plants with three distinct forms: the upright, the mounder and the trailer, or what gardener Steve Silk calls the thriller, the filler and the spiller.

The upright acts as a vertical focal point and can be placed in the back or center of the pot. Mounders, up to two-thirds the height of the upright, should be packed in to fill your container. A few trailers can spill over the side to anchor the pot to the ground, but remember that all the plants need to work together.

- ✓ **Add foliage plants for textural interest.** Plant leaves vary in texture, size, shape and color. As flowers fade, foliage plants will still be going strong. Use them generously in your containers.
- ✓ **Or don't vary your plant shapes and add foliage.** Exceptions can be made to every rule. An alternative to variety in your container is a harmonious mass of similarly shaped and colored plants, such as a collection of pastel impatiens and tuberous begonias or white, orange and yellow cosmos and zinnias.
- ✓ **Think outside the pot.** Most people use annuals in containers because they are so reliable, colorful and productive. The more adventurous might want to try small trees, shrubs, perennials and herbs. Because the blooming season for perennials is short, select plants that have attractive foliage for a long season of interest. Many good varieties are listed later on. Divide fast-growing perennials every few years in the spring and re-pot trees and shrubs that outgrow their containers
- ✓ **Choose colors carefully,** considering both bloom and foliage colors. Generally, two main colors and one minor accent suffice.
 - **Harmonious** colors can be either different shades of one color or hues next to each other on the color wheel (e.g., orange and yellow or red and purple).
 - **Contrasting** colors are those opposite each other on the color wheel (blue and orange, purple and yellow).

- **Warm** colors, such as red, orange and yellow, add drama.
 - **Cool** colors, such as blue and purple, and pastels are more relaxing.
 - **Silver** foliage harmonizes with all colors, toning down the hot colors and enhancing the cool ones. It also looks great with pink. White ties purples and blues together.
- ✓ **Decorate with your pots.** Just as you decorate your home with either one large painting as a focal point or groupings of smaller art objects, use that same approach in your yard. Group pots in pleasing arrangements, even raising them to add more interest or adding other accessories, such as a watering can or stone sculpture.

Fertilizing

Fertilizing is a must if your potting mix does not contain fertilizer. Add a granular or water soluble fertilizer at planting time. Follow the label directions carefully. Choose a balanced fertilizer (such as, 10-10-10 or 20-20-20), which indicates the percentages of nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium, respectively.

Nitrogen is a soluble nutrient and will wash out of the pot with frequent waterings. Phosphorous and potassium are insoluble. A pot containing annuals needs to be fertilized into the fall to ensure continued growth and blooms. Don't believe the myth that nitrogen will develop too much leaf growth instead of blooms. Since all flowers are produced on green stems, green growth is essential.

Maintenance

A few regular tasks will keep your pots looking incredible all season long.

- **Water.** Water your pots to keep them evenly moist. Smaller pots in a hot, sunny, windy location might need watering several times a day. Large pots in shady, protected areas might need water only every three days. Check them carefully. To ensure that plants are thoroughly soaked, water slowly enough so that water trickles through the soil and eventually streams out the drainage hole.
- **Deadhead.** Pick off old blossoms to prolong blooming and keep plants neat.
- **Prune.** Pinch back any plants that get leggy to encourage bushy growth and more blooms.
- **Groom.** Remove dead leaves and stalks to keep plants attractive. If they seem spent late in the season, replace them with fall blooms.

Season's End

Like garden beds, containers need to be prepared for winter.

- **Pots with annuals** can be emptied (recycle the potting mix into your compost pile or planting beds), washed and stacked for storage. It's best to replace your potting mix yearly, but you can reuse it if you mix it with equal parts of new soil-less mix the following spring.

- **Pots with perennials** can be stored in a garage or shed, watering moderately every three to four weeks. Perennials, trees and shrubs that are hardy to Zones 3 or 4 can over-winter outside in their pots. You can bring herb pots indoors to use throughout the winter.
- **Clay and hypertufa pots** might crack if left outside where the potting mix will expand and shrink with freezing and thawing temperatures.

Choices and More Choices

Consider the following trees, shrubs, perennials, annuals and herbs when creating your beautiful, dramatic containers.

Small Trees/Flowering Shrubs

Variety	Light Needs	Zone
<i>Acer palmatum</i> (Japanese Maple)	A.M. sun	5
Azalea varieties	Shade	Various
Citrus	A.M. sun	Various
<i>Clethra alnifolia</i> (Summersweet)	Shade	4
<i>Cornus alba</i> or <i>sericea</i> (Dogwood, especially variegated varieties)	Shade	2
<i>Hydrangea paniculata arborescens</i> (Hydrangea)	Shade	3
<i>Itea virginica</i> (Sweetspire)	Shade	5
<i>Magnolia stellata</i> (Star Magnolia)	Shade	4
<i>Magnolia virginiana</i> (Sweet Bay Magnolia)	Shade	5
<i>Prunus virginiana</i> (Canadian Cherry)	Sun	2
<i>Spiraea</i> & <i>S. japonica</i> (Spiraea, especially 'Dakota Goldcharm')	Sun	4
<i>Symphoricarpos alba</i> (Coralberry)	Part sun	3
<i>Syringa</i> (Lilac, especially dwarf varieties)	Sun	3

Evergreens

Variety	Light Needs	Zone
<i>Buxus koreana</i> (Boxwood)	Shade	4
<i>Ilex verticillata</i> (Holly)	Part sun	3
<i>Juniper chinensis</i> (Juniper, spreading or upright)	Sun	3
<i>Picea glauca</i> (Dwarf Alberta Spruce)	Sun	2
<i>Pinus mugo</i> (Mugo Pine)	Sun	2
<i>Thuja occidentalis</i> (Arborvitae 'Emerald')	Sun	2

Grasses

Variety	Characteristic	Light Needs	Zone
<i>Hakonechloa</i> (Hakone)	Gold or white variegations	Shade	4
<i>Pennisetum alopecuroides</i> (Fountain Grass)	Broader leaves, purple plumes	Sun	5-4
<i>Miscanthus</i> (Maiden Grass)	Various	Sun	6-4
<i>Schizachyrium</i> (Little Bluestem)	Blue-green, red-orange in fall	Sun	3
<i>Sporobolus</i> (Prairie Dropseed)	Yellow-orange in fall	Sun	4

Perennials

Form	Variety	Feature	Zone
Upright for sun	Rose	Easy-care, long-blooming	Various
	Sedum (tall)	Broad, leathery foliage	3
Mounding for sun	Artemesia	Silver, lacy, ferny or cut-leaf foliage	5
	Hemerocallis (Daylilies)	Grassy foliage, upright flowers	3
	Nepeta (Catmint)	Fragrant, long blooming	3
	Scabiosa (Pincushion)	Long-blooming	3
	Rudbeckia (Toto, Goldsturm)	Long-blooming	4
Trailing for sun	Nepeta (Catmint)	Fragrant, long blooming	3
	Sedum (ground covers)	Variety of foliage form, color	3
Mounding for shade	Ajuga	Compact, broad, dark foliage	4
	Astilbe	Feathery, some dark foliage	4
	Bergenia	Wide, dark foliage	3
	Dicentra (Bleeding Heart)	Fern foliage, heart-shaped bloom	3
	Heuchera (Coral Bells)	Rounded/pointy/marbled foliage	3
	Ferns	Colored, feathery foliage	Various
	Tiarella (Foam Flower)	Compact, maple-shaped foliage	3
	Hosta	Broad, rounded, colored foliage	3
	Alchemilla (Lady's Mantle)	Kidney-shaped foliage, foamy flowers	4
	Lamium	Compact, variegated foliage	3
	Liriope	Grassy foliage, hyacinth-type bloom	4
Trailing for shade	Pulmonaria	Thin silver-spotted foliage	3
	Hedera (Ivy)	Dark pointy foliage	5
	Lysimachia aurea	Rounded gold leaves	3

Annuals

Form	Variety	Feature
Upright for sun	Angelonia	Snapdragon-like, handles heat
	Musa (Banana)	Large, oval, variegated foliage
	Canna	Wide leaves, late-summer bloom
	Dracaena	A classic green or bronze spike
	Hibiscus	Round, showy flowers
	Phormium	Spiky bronze, red, tricolor
	Salvia, (Navajo)	Dense foliage, fragrant
	Salvia, (Victoria)	Long-blooming spikes
Mounding for sun	Coleus, (Sun)	Broad patterned foliage
	Cosmos, (Cosmic)	Compact plant, double blooms
	Cosmos, (Sonata)	Airy plant, daisy blooms
	Senecio cineraria (Dusty Miller)	Large or fine silver foliage
	Geranium	A classic, rounded foliage
	Heliotrope (Marine)	Large, fragrant blooms
	Melampodium	Covered in small daisy blooms
	Nicotiana	Trumpet blooms
	Strobilnathes (Persian Shield)	Long, purple-veined foliage
	Penta	Upright clusters, for butterflies
	Peppers, ornamental	Colorful fruit, variety of foliage
	Zinnia, (Star)	Narrow, single blooms
	Zinnia, (Profusion)	Wide, single blooms
Trailing for sun	Geranium (Ivy-leaved)	Variety of leaf textures, colors
	Helichrysum (Licorice)	Silver, lime-green, white foliage
	Lantana (Patriot)	Disc blooms, butterfly favorite
	Petunia (Dream, Surfinia, Supertunia)	Covered in petite blooms, low maintenance
	Ipomenea (Sweet Potato vine)	Large, cut, colorful leaves
	Verbena (Tukana)	Broad-leaved, disc blooms
	Verbena (Tapien, Babylon)	Fine-leaved, disc blooms
Vinca vine	Classic, try creamy Wojo's Gem	
Upright for shade	Colocasia (Elephant Ear)	Enormous green or dark leaves

(cont.)

Form	Variety	Feature
Mounding for shade	Begonias, (wax)	Compact, foliage variety
	Begonias, (tuberous)	Large leaves, showy flowers
	Browallia	Star-shaped blooms
	Coleus	Broad patterned foliage
	Impatiens	Classic, non-stop blooms
Trailing for shade	Bacopa: (Snowstorm, Giant Snowflake)	Delicate flowers on long fronds
	Plectranthus	Thick-leaved, silver, lime foliage
	Scaevola (Fanflower)	Fan-shaped flowers
Herbs		
Form	Variety	Feature
Upright	Laurus nobilis (Bay Laurel)	Smooth green foliage, slow growing
	Foeniculum vulgare (Bronze Fennel)	Dark, feathery foliage
	Allium schoenoprasum (Chives)	Grassy, purple flowers in spring
	Rosmarinus officinalis (Rosemary)	Needle foliage
Mounding	Ocimum basilicum (Basil)	Green, purple leaves, many flavors
	<i>Lavandula angustifolia</i> (Lavender 'Munstead')	Silvery foliage, spiky purple blooms
	<i>Origanum majorana</i> (Marjoram)	Compact, green, golden, variegated
	Origanum vulgare (Oregano)	Try Greek, Cuban, Dittany of Crete
	Petroselinum crispum (Parsley)	Curly or flat (Italian) leaves
	Salvia officinalis (Sage)	Try Golden, Purple, Tricolor
	Thymus vulgaris (Thyme)	Foliage, flavor varieties, especially Lemon
Trailing	Nasturtium officinale (Nasturtium)	Rounded leaves, peppery blooms
	Rosmarinus officinalis (Rosemary 'Irene')	Needle foliage, fast growing
	Santolina	Soft and silvery

Sources

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- Dennis Patton, Johnson County Extension Horticulture Agent, Sept. 2005.
- Jim Wilson, author of *Jim Wilson's Container Gardening*, Taylor Trade Pub., 2000. Talk presented April 2003.

Plant information from:

- Arnold's Greenhouse, LeRoy, KS
- Kaw Valley Greenhouses, Manhattan, KS
- Longview Gardens, Kansas City, MO
- White Flower Farm, Litchfield, CT

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