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A Yucca plant towers above the rest of this container mix.

Putting it in pots

Story and photos by Colleen Watson

Planting in containers is nothing new but it does continue to be a hot trend because there are many advantages to container gardening.

There is less risk of soil borne diseases, it virtually eliminates weed problems, and because the pots can be moved there is more control over moisture, light, and temperature, not to mention the amazing wow factor a well-planned and well maintained container garden can bring to your landscape. But how do you achieve those picture perfect results?

Let's start with the basics. First select a suitable container, one that is large enough to hold plenty of soil medium to meet the requirements of the plants. Ensure there are drainage holes for excess water to drain away. The bigger the pot the less often you'll have to water, so go big: at least 18 to 24 inches in diameter.

Next, choose the type of soil and amendments to place in the pots. There are many recipes on the internet claiming to be the best, but they all aim to achieve the same results. Plants need water and nutrients. They require some air in the soil and around their root systems, otherwise the soil becomes compacted and root rot can occur. Plants need a home they can anchor their roots into so they don't tip over in a strong wind. Stop and think of how much growth, numerous blossoms, and abundant crops we expect out of these plants in such a short season and in so little growing medium. The soil needs to hold water and nutrients, be light and airy and at the same time, provide a sturdy home for the plant to thrive.

This brings us to the importance of fertilizing. Whether you are using organic, granular, or water soluble fertilizer, it is important to follow the directions on the package and "feed them like hungry teenagers". That comment came from Duayne Friesen, sales rep for Ball Horticulture. It was the best advice I received to help me achieve those picture perfect results.

Right plant, right place

The next step is choosing the right plants for the right place. The plant label or tag contains a lot of information regarding the plant's needs and the maximum size it will grow. Like people, some plants prefer a shady cool location. If you try to place them on a hot sunny patio all day they will be very miserable. Whereas plants that prefer a sunny location will not tolerate a lot of shade. Also consider how much each plant is capable of growing or how tall it



Bougainvillea and poinsettia in a container.



A colourful container can help liven up entranceways.



String of pearls and other succulents can create an eclectic mix.



Red petunias help brighten up this already colourful mix of canna and heuchera.

will become in the few short months of our growing season. You want your pots to look great as soon as you fill them and throughout the growing season so place each plant very close together, in fact, cram 'em in! Now you're beginning to understand the importance of providing the proper soil medium and nutrients. Because the plants are in such close proximity to each other, choose ones with similar water requirements as well as light. Again, just like people, we tend to have the most fun with people who are similar to us and like the same things. The same goes for plants.

Think of the pot or container as a mini-landscape. The same design principles that apply to your yard apply to the container, just in a much smaller scale. Design is design. Consider things like size, shape, colour, and texture when selecting plants. There is a lot of talk about choosing thrillers – a plant that stands out from the rest (that's your focal point – a design principle), fillers – plants that fill up space (usually by adding texture – a design principle) and spillers – the plants that trail over the pot (it helps to create balance – you guessed it – another design principle). Become a designer and let the artist in you create and experiment with a variety of plants. Art is not about right or wrong – it's about personal preference.



There are plenty of options when it comes to container styles, no matter how you may want to express yourself.

Great plant choices include perennials

For a hot sunny location I have used ribbon grass '*Phalaris arundinacea*', something I certainly wouldn't want in my garden beds because it is very invasive and can spread quickly but stays controlled in a pot as long as the roots are not sneaking out through the drainage holes. Team up with trailing portulaca, petunias, and ornamental cabbage. For instant height, colour and texture why not try a small shrub? Barberry looks fantastic and can also tolerate a hot sunny location. Pair with a variety of sedums.

For shady locations try a variety of hostas. They are instant fillers and look beautiful with tuberous begonia and impatiens. Even a honeysuckle vine could be used with an obelisk to add height to the container or be allowed to trail over the edge of the pot to become a spiller. Evergreens can also be fillers providing colour and texture. Upright junipers or cedars add height while low growing spreading junipers can act as spillers.

Ensure that you are selecting plants with the same light and moisture requirements. Remember right plant – right place. Even if the plants you select are zone 2 or 3 there's very little chance of their survival through a winter if kept in the container. Instead, transplant them in late fall into a shrub bed or vegetable garden.

Tropicals

Every year I move my indoor palms, fig tree, bougainvillea, cacti, and kaffer lime tree to the great outdoors. It is critical to acclimate or gradually introduce them into their new environment. It's amazing how much growth occurs during their days outdoors. Once the season is coming to a close they will need to be moved back inside prior to heavy frosts. I have discovered that if I move the plants into a protected outdoor area – under the eaves on the south side of the house for example – and cover them with an old sheet, temperatures around -5C will kill most insects eliminating the need to spray with insecticide.

I think the best thing about container gardening is it provides an inclusive opportunity for those who may not have the space or physical abilities to maintain a full landscape. It gives everyone the chance to have their hands in the soil, bring out their inner artist, and grow something they can be proud of.

Colleen Watson is a certified prairie horticulturalist specializing in landscape design and owner of Watson Designs in Landscaping—Planting your dreams and individual style into every original design. www.watsondesigns.ca. ❁



The tall structural "thriller" adds drama to this pot.



Lean grasses, spikes or other thrillers in this pot adds some winter interest to the backyard.