

Colorful Containers

It's almost summer, except for that amazing snow we had at the end of April, and time to consider annuals in the garden. A great place for annuals is containers because their growth is limited and they're usually easier to remove from the pot than perennials. I love perennial grasses in a pot, but you have to take an axe to the pot to get them out after the first year.

Containers

But containers don't have to be just pots. They can be anything waterproof that has drain holes in the bottom and can hold up in our sun. The bigger the better because when it's really hot and dry here you don't want to have to water hourly. So self-watering pots or dripped to run with your irrigation would be nice. The drip tubing can be put through a drainage hole before potting soil is added or it can be run behind the pot, out of sight.

If you are thinking just pots, ceramic with an unglazed interior that can weather our winter is a good choice. Plastic pots are great because they are light weight and don't crack, but the fact they are light weight means they can blow in the wind or be stolen easily. Terracotta pots lose too much water because they're porous – good where it rains a lot, not so good here. And they can winter crack. If you have a favorite Talavera pot, use a plastic liner and bring the pot inside for the winter.

Containers can be brightly colored, patterned, or neutral. Neutral colors allow for the most creativity with the flowers, but a favorite patterned pot can be accented with neutral or complementary flowers and still look good.

Container Stuffers

For very big containers where you want to fill with something so you don't pay for all the potting mix that's deeper than the plant roots, you can use anything that drains well, covered with landscape fabric to keep the potting mix in. In the past I used shipping peanuts, but now that they're water soluble this doesn't work! Empty plastic soda bottles and upside down 4" plastic nursery pots are other choices.

Potting Mix

Now that we have a container we need to consider what to use for "soil". Potting mix was developed for the nursery trade so pots would weigh less, especially for shipping. I prefer potting soil (Black Gold) because it has some nutrients in it although it weighs a little more. Some potting mixes contain water holding crystals and these help with watering, but do break down over a few years. I prefer coir in my potting mix instead of peat moss because coir dries out more slowly and is easier to rewet. Coir also comes from coconuts, a renewable resource instead of peat bogs.

Watering

Watering can be done with your irrigation system using a dripper. I have tried the umbrella spoke type of sprayer, but it puts out too much water even on its lowest setting. Be sure to group plants in the pot that have the same watering frequency. Putting a succulent with zinnias is not a good combination – one of them is bound to die.

Growing Environment

Now we're ready to consider plants, but first we need to know what kind of growing environment the container will be in. Is it sun or shade? Your choice of plants is different based on the container

location. Check the plant label to determine which plants do best and where. Or if the nursery has it under shade cloth it's probably **not** a New Mexico sun loving plant. All the plants in the container should be conditioned to growing environment so group plants that need shade together.

Design tips

Finally, we want to structure the plantings to make a splash. We'll consider three types of plants: a spiller that falls gracefully over the edge of the container, a filler to be the middle ground and fill the space, and a thriller to add height and grab your interest. The table below lists plants and their function in the design.

You can use bright colors, if this is your favorite, or you can use restful choices. You can also contrast different sized leaves and textures – a tall strappy dark purple flax, with yellow petunias, and a lime green sweet potato vine would look great together – but maybe not in a highly-patterned pot.

In shade consider some white or light colored leaves so the container can be seen.

Grouping containers allows you to mix colors, styles, and especially different heights. I prefer a low wide planter, a midsize pot, and a large pot placed in a triangle. Each container can hold one type of flower or each container can hold a mix of flowers (or herbs). It's whatever makes you feel good.

Plant Choices

	Spiller	Filler	Thriller
grasses and sedges			
Bright Lights Swiss Chard			x
Dracena			x
Fiber optic grass			x
Juncus sedge			x
Millet			x
New Zealand flax (<i>Phormium</i>)			x
Pennisteam "Fireworks"			x
Purple fountain grass			x
flowers			
Alyssum	x		
Angelonia		x	
Bacopa	x		
Callibrachoa	x		
Chrysanthemums		x	
Coleus		x	
Creeping Jenny	x		
Dahlberg daisy	x		
Diascia		x	
Fan flower	x		

Geranium (<i>Pelargonium</i>)		x	
Heuchera		x	
Impatiens		x	
Johnny jump-ups		x	
Lantana		x	
Licorice plant "icicle"	x		
Lobelia		x	
Lysmachia	x		
Nemesia		x	
Pansies and spring bulbs			
Pentas		x	
Petunias		x	
Profusion zinnia		x	
Salvias		x	x
Swedish ivy	x		
Sweet potato vine (lime and burgundy)	x		
Trailing zinnia	x		
Trailing verbena	x		
Vinca		x	

Easy to Do

Now that you know the secrets to creating splashy containers, watch for plant sales or start your own annuals from seed. Containers are really easy to do and you can be as creative as you'd like.

Open Garden

Once again on the 4th of July we will open our garden to visitors from 8 am to 11 am. Daylilies and I both look better at 8 than at 11. You can see my pots and decide what you think of my combinations. I'm looking forward to seeing photos of your planted containers and maybe we can put them on our website. Wouldn't that be lovely.