

Autumn Container Gardens

Temperatures are cooling and days are getting shorter. The sunlight has a golden glow, leaves are turning burgundy and orange, and there is a crispness in the morning air. Bring on the Asters, Mums, and pumpkin spice!

There are some lovely plant options in the fall that we don't have earlier in the season. We can deck out our pots with the delicious autumn hues of Mums, Rudbeckia and Asters. Add some fun foliage with Ornamental Cabbage and Kale, or showy Millet. Autumn is also the beginning of Pansy and Viola season. Tuck these darlings into your pots now to enjoy their blooming faces during the freezing winter and through spring.

Another thing to consider this time of the year are evergreen plants, twig color and foliage textures that we can enjoy through the winter. A stunning arrangement can be created using a variety foliage shapes, colors and textures. If you don't want to miss out on the rich colors found in fall flowers, choose some winter evergreens and accent them with a Mum, Aster or even an Ornamental Peppers. Have some Pansies or pinecones ready to take their place for the winter months.

If you are taking your summer annuals out of the pot to transition into autumn, this is a good time to change out the soil. Those summer annuals are generally heavy feeders that deplete the soil. Many pests and diseases that show up during the summer can be harbored in the soil. Get rid of the old stuff. During the colder months, plants will not be doing nearly as much growing and your soil will still be pretty good when you change things out in the spring. As long as there have not been pest or disease issues over the winter, you can add some fertilizer and plug in your spring color.

Going into winter, the sunlight needs of plants are not as critical. We tend to have many cloudy days here in the PNW. When we do have sun, it is less harsh and there are fewer hours of it. I sometimes mix shade plants with sun lovers for the winter and then send them to their desired areas in the garden come spring. Do keep in mind that dark shade may let foliage color fade and keep flowering plants from blooming as well.

I love a pot packed full of plants. Since they won't be growing too much as the weather cools, root balls can be planted tightly as long as there is some soil underneath them so they can stretch their roots. If you plan to leave some evergreens in place as you transition your containers into spring, make sure you leave them some growing room.

Evergreen and winter hardy plants to consider:

<u>Thrillers</u>	<u>Fillers</u>	<u>Spillers</u>
Camellias	Bergenia	Ajuga
Conifers	Cabbage/Kale	Creeping Jenny
Evergreen Shrubs	Dusty Miller	Ivy
Fatsia	Euphorbia	Oregano
Pieris	Evergreen Ferns	Thyme
Sedges & Rushes	Heath/Heather	Vinca
Twig Dogwood	Hebe	Wintergreen
	Hellebores	Wire Vine
	Heuchera/Heucherella	
	Lavender	

Tuck in some Pansies! If you want flowers all fall, winter and spring, Pansies and Violas are the best! This is the beginning of their season. Plant them now to get a big bang for your buck!

These plants are loosely grouped and differences in varieties will make them useful in different positions. You could plant a container with just Conifers and easily fill the thriller, filler and spiller roles. The size of your container may dictate the need for larger or smaller plants. A plant that is tall enough to be a thriller in a small pot may act as a filler in a larger pot.

Most importantly, this is YOUR creation! Use colors you love. Play with textures and interesting combinations. Get some perennials that will have a second use in your flowerbed. Have fun and make it your own!

Container Design Tips

Container planting can add so much joy and beauty to our lives and landscapes. Some people are without a yard to garden in and are restricted to container gardening. I, myself, have lived in several locations where I did not have a yard to use, but was able to create a garden from containers. Pots, tubs and anything that can hold soil while allowing drainage can add opportunity for colorful pops on decks and doorsteps, as well as dimension and interest to landscapes.

Things to know before shopping for plants:

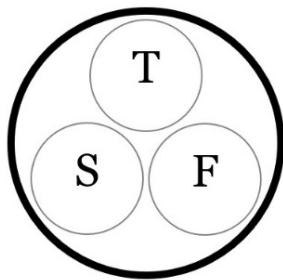
1. **What size opening does your container have?** This will help you figure out how many and what size plants you can fit in your arrangement.
2. **How tall is your container?** This will help you choose plants with complimentary height. For balance, I often choose plants that, through the season, will grow to the same or 1.5 times the height of the container. I find that a wide, bulky pot offers more visual weight to the bottom of the arrangement and that it can handle a taller centerpiece or something with a wide canopy like many Japanese maples, for example.
3. **How many hours of direct sun will your container receive in a day?**
4. **Consider the colors and textures in the area.** What color is your container? What color is your house, fence, shed, etc? What plant foliage and flower colors are nearby?
5. **How will your container be viewed?** Will you be viewing your container from all sides or will it be backed up to a structure or otherwise viewed from one side?

When choosing plants for your container, it is so helpful to know what size your container is. It will help you figure out how many and what size plants you can fit in your arrangement. Knowing how tall the container is can help you choose plants with complementary height. For balance, I often choose plants that, throughout the season, will grow to the same or 1.5 times the height of the container. I find that a wide, bulky pot offers more visual weight to the bottom of the arrangement and that it can handle a taller centerpiece or something with a wide canopy, like many Japanese Maples for example.

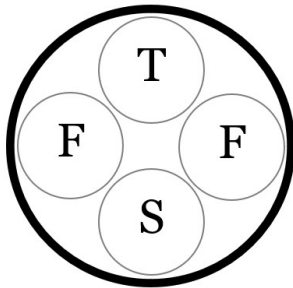
It is so important to the success of your plants to know how much direct sun, or lack thereof, the location for your container will receive. Full sun is considered 6+ hours. If you have sun shining directly on your plants for half of the day, they are in a full sun location. Part sun or part shade is generally between 3 and 6 hours of direct sun per day. Anything less than 3 hours and you have a spot for shade-loving plants.

Design Options: Many people have a pretty good idea of what colors they enjoy, but most struggle when it comes to composition. Below I have put together some “maps” to help when piecing together container arrangements, both one-sided and centered options. Many of the plants in the Seasonal Color department here in the nursery are in 4” and quart size pots. If you have a 14” or 16” container, 7 plants from 4” pots fit nicely. The bigger the container you are planting, the more quart and/or larger-sized plants you can use. When choosing plants, keep in mind that some plants grow more vigorously than others. If all of this feels daunting, we are always happy to help you find plants here in the nursery that play well together.

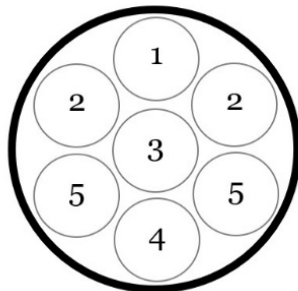
One-sided Design Options: Here are some design choices if your container will mainly be viewed from one side. These work well for planting a full container of annuals or plants you plan to keep in the container for a single season. The third diagram below is a design combination I create very often - but they’re all great!



Let’s start with a simple design. This includes 3 plants, a “thriller” as your tallest element in the back, a “filler” as the shorter, mounding plant, and a “spiller” as the plant that trails over the edge of your container. This design is wonderful up against a fence or flanking your doorway. Include some larger specimens in a tall pot for boldness and eye-catching drama.

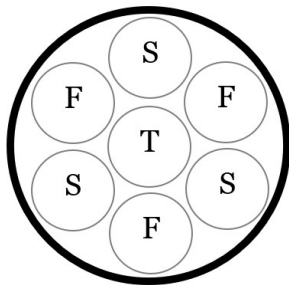


Here is another option with 2 “filler” plants - these can be the same if you like a symmetrical design. Adding variety with 2 different plants in the “filler” spots creates an opportunity for additional color or texture in your combination.

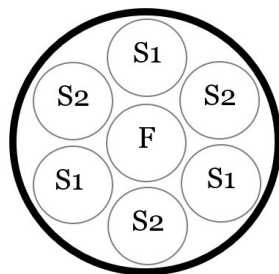


Rather than using the terms thriller, filler and spiller for this one, I find it easier to see it as stair steps. Number 1 in the back is the tallest. Flank your tallest plants with some shorter, but still upright plants (number 2). Number 3 is a mid-sized filler - this plant can be left out in smaller containers. Use a short mounding plant for Number 4 and a couple of trailing plants for the Number 5 spots.

Centered (or multi-directional) Design Options: Continuing on with designs that are visually appealing from all sides, these design options are ideal for containers that you want to look great from every angle.



Now for a centered design that will look lovely from all sides. We have a “thriller” in the center and three “fillers” arranged around it in a triangle. Using 3 of the same plant creates a round, balanced look. Lastly, choose 3 “spillers” to trail out between the “fillers.”



Lastly, I have modified the centered design for use with hanging baskets. We have the same concept with the triangles creating a round arrangement. The difference is that the centerpiece is a “filler” to fill out the center. Choose 3 of one “spiller”, 3 of another and alternate them.

These are just some guidelines I use when planting containers, both for myself at home and for the nursery, but these are not rules. Use the tips that help and inspire your creativity, leave behind those that don't. Ultimately, this is about experimenting, learning, and having fun with beautiful plants!