

Good options *for* container gardens

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Question: I have a deck which gets full sun and I want to have some pretty flowering containers out there. When I have tried before, my flowers never looked as good as the ones I see at other places. Can you give me some tips for growing beautiful container gardens?

Answer: Growing flowering plants in containers is one of my favorite gardening projects. I'm glad you asked about growing in a sunny area as the choice for flowering annuals that do well in sun is vast.

Margo Roten of DCMG covered plants for shady areas in her article published in the News-Review on May 20.

Let's talk about some of the basics of container gardening and then some of the plants that do well here in our area.

Whatever container you choose must have drainage – usually in the form of several drainage holes in the bottom of the container. If you have an expensive container you do not want to drill holes into, it is possible to layer a brick or something similar on which to place another pot (with drainage) inside your original container; just make sure you don't block the drainage holes in either case.

I use saucers on my deck pots but watch to make sure the plants aren't standing in water and use some broken pottery or rocks in the bottom of containers to make sure the holes stay clear.

Keep in mind that the larger the pot, the easier it is to keep the plants hydrated. Smaller pots dry out quickly and could need to be watered twice a day in hot weather.

A larger pot also gives you more design options, although a grouping of several different-sized containers is quite effective. Small plants in a large pot are just overwhelmed – and the same is true for using too small a pot for larger plants.

Watering will depend on the weather, the types of plants, the size of the pot and the type of soil you have. A potting soil



PHOTO COURTESY OF JANET BITTER

This newly-planted pot will grow and fill out with a nice contrast of colors

designed for containers should be used. Regular garden soil is not recommended.

I do use saucers underneath my containers and make sure that if the water isn't taken up by the plants in a couple of hours after I've watered, to empty the saucers so the plant roots don't get waterlogged and rot. However, if you let your soil mix dry out completely, it may be difficult to wet again.

Make sure you check before you water by feeling down about 2 inches. If it's moist, don't water.

Container plants need more fertilizer than in-ground plantings to stay looking good. Use a slow-release granular fertilizer when planting, then when plants are established use a water-soluble fertilizer every couple of weeks throughout the season – either a complete (contains N-P-K) one or one high in phosphorus (something like 10-60-10) to promote blooms. Be sure to follow label directions.

Now for the fun part: choosing plants! My own experience has taught me that the types

of plants, including the varieties within a plant species, have a lot to do with creating a container that is beautiful and long lasting.

Take petunias, for instance. Petunias are one of my favorite flowers to use in containers. There are newer, improved trailing-type petunias that do not require as much pruning back and pinching as the old standard varieties, to stay pretty.

There are lots of improved varieties of old standby annuals which have a better growth form or disease resistance or

just new colors. It is worth searching those out.

Decide what colors you want to highlight, or just create a pretty mix. You are the artist! The general rule for a well-balanced container is to choose thrillers (plants that are spiky and tall, usually to go in the center of the pot), fillers (mounding plants) and spillers (trailing plants to cascade over the edge of the container).

As a rule, plants should be two times as tall as the visible part of the container. When considering colors, remember to include different textures and shades of foliage. Remember to use plants with similar water requirements together in the pot.

Don't skimp on quantity – you can plant a little closer than you usually would if you watch your fertilizer and water. Some of these plants, depending on variety, can be in multiple categories.

A few of my favorite container plants for our area:

■ **Thrillers:** snapdragons, canna, salvia (taller linear varieties like 'Victoria'), geraniums, taller zinnias, dahlia, dracaena spikes, Angelonia, heliotrope

■ **Fillers:** petunias, alyssum, violas, signet-type marigold (i.e., 'lemon gem'), calibrachoa, portulaca (check out the newer hybrid species for real pops of color), gaillardia, 'profusion' zinnias

■ **Spillers:** Ipomoea (sweet potato vines), trailing lobelia, calibrachoa (can spill and be a filler), bacopa

It is not too late to get some pretty pots going for your sunny deck or porch. Be creative in your choice of container and have fun choosing the plants best for your location. I hope your containers are beautiful this year!

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.