



Colorful Annual Containers

James C. Schmidt, Horticulturist
University of Illinois

Annuals in containers or “color pots” are a welcome addition to the porch, patio, or balcony. They also can be used out in the garden for a spot of color in an area that might not lend itself to a traditional bed. Using containers of annual around the home has other advantages: you can extend the ground level up steps or onto a patio; attract or distract viewer’s eye; or form a backdrop or screen to block a view. Containers used alone certainly can be a plus for the landscape, but massed together they create a luxuriant focal point. This fact sheet is intended to give you the main pointers in putting a colorful container together.

Choosing a Container. The container you use can be anything that will hold soil. The only basic requirement is that it *must* have drainage. Similarly, you’ll need a good soil mix. The container needs to have adequate drainage holes. Without drainage, roots are deprived of oxygen and the roots eventually rot. Plain garden soil should not be used in containers without amending it. Both drainage and aeration will be poor and results will be unsatisfactory. Instead, one of the soil-less media is recommended. An alternative is to make a mix using 1 part soil, 1 part peat moss, and 1 part perlite or coarse sand. Fill the container to about 1-inch from the top. Place materials such as crushed rock, crushed flower pots or gravel in the bottom of the container to permit rapid runoff of excess water. In succeeding years, replace the old soil with a fresh mixture rather than re-using it.

Choosing Plants. What you plant in the container is only limited by your imagination. Basically any annual that you can grow in a garden will work well in a container – you just want to be sure to combine plants that have similar cultural requirements. Perennials are usually not grown in containers due to the sensitivity of the root systems to cold temperatures. However, some perennials can be grown in containers and moved into an unheated building during the winter. Another alternative is to remove the plants from the container and heel-them in the ground in autumn and mulch. However there is no guarantee of success with either method.

When it comes to selecting plants, use the same principles that you would in a garden. Consider individual forms, colors, and textures. A plant’s form is simply its shape or growth habit. Trailing plants soften the edges of the pot, while upright plants fit nicely in the middle. Tall plants in the center provide contrast to smaller, mounded plants and give the container some structure. Choose plants that give long-lasting or large

numbers of flowers. Geraniums, marigolds, petunias, and ageratum are just a few of the annuals that flower constantly with little care.

Not everything in the container needs to produce flowers. Non-flowering plants can add texture and shape as well as carry the show when the flowering plants are not at their peak. Try licorice plant (*Helichrysum petiolare*), coleus (*Solenostemon scutellarioides*), Persian shield (*Strobilanthes dyeranus*), polka dot plant (*Hypoestes phyllostachya*), Dusty miller (*Senecio cineraria*), caladium (*Caladium x hortulanum*, or canna (*Canna x generalis*). Ornamental grasses such as Eulalia grass (*Miscanthus* sp), Fountain grass (*Pennisetum* sp.), and Purple-leaved Fountain Grass (*Pennisetum setaceum* 'Rubrum') add height and movement as well as seasonal interest.

Likewise, herbs make excellent additions to a container, not only for their interesting foliage and fragrance, but for their usefulness. Lavender, sage, basil, dill, parsley, chives are a few that combine beautifully with annuals. Herbs such as prostrate rosemary or thyme are great draped over the edge of the container.

Regardless of what you choose, keep contrast in mind. Using a fine-textured plant next to a bold-textured plant creates contrast. Vary the heights to provide interest – similar to a city skyline. Be sure to select plants for their preference of sun or shade as well as other conditions that would occur in the location where you plan to use them.

While color is a personal choice, there are some guidelines for creating effective containers. Generally only three or four colors per container is suggested. More than that makes the planting looks 'busy'. Most times, there are really no bad combinations. More likely than not, the results will be a pleasing serendipity.

Planting. Fill the container about 80% full with the soil mix. This allows room for the roots of the plants. Before planting, set the plants, still in their pots, inside the container to see if you like the arrangement. When you're satisfied with it, start planting. Work from the center of the container to the edge. As you plant each plant, break up the mass of roots that form at the bottom of the container and firm additional soil around the root system of each plant. The trick to planting colorful containers is to over-plant a little to achieve a profusion of color. Plant close, but leave a little room for growth. After all the plants are set, add more soil mix to bring the soil level to within an inch of the top of the container. The final step is to water thoroughly.

Maintenance. Gardening in containers requires more maintenance than caring for the same plants in the ground. If you neglect them, failure is certain. Here are some tips:

- Containers need more water than beds. Daily watering may be necessary as the season progresses. The frequency of watering depends on the climate, where the containers are located, the types of plants used, and the type of

container. Avoid watering on a schedule; check the soil moisture by sticking your finger into the soil.

- Because of the frequent watering, containers require additional fertilizer. Use a commercial soluble fertilizer about every 2 weeks to keep the plants growing and looking their best. An alternative is to use a slow-release fertilizer. Follow directions on the fertilizer label. Some signs of insufficient fertilizer include a reduction of flowers and/or the leaves turning yellow.
- Use water-absorbing polymers in the soil mix. These materials, sold under various trade names, resemble salt when you buy them but puff up into jelly-like clumps when wet (absorbing 30 to 400 times their weight in water). They reduce the need for frequent watering by preventing the soil from drying out. You can add dry or wet crystals to potting soil, but dry crystals are easier to work with and are easier to incorporate. Follow the label directions precisely (otherwise, when used at a higher rate, the gel will push the soil out of the container). Mix the crystals thoroughly with the soil.
- When you water, take time to groom the plants. Remove any yellowing, diseased, or dead leaves and snip out old stems. Remove spent blossoms as they occur to encourage more flowering and to keep the plant attractive. Frequent grooming makes the job easier.
- Check for insect infestations. Even a well-groomed planting can have insects hiding within. Look for signs of insects and treat accordingly.

A Baker's Dozen of Combinations To Try

Purple petunias (*Petunia x hybrida*), summer snapdragon (*Angelonia angustifolia*), dwarf French yellow marigolds (*Tagetes patula*), and sweet alyssum (*Lobularia maritima*).

Swan river daisy (*Brachyscome iberidifolia*), white petunias (*Petunia x hybrida*), heliotrope (*Heliotropium arborescens*), and Summer Snapdragon (*Angelonia angustifolia*).

Geraniums (*Pelargonium x hortorum*), dusty miller (*Senecio cineraria*), mealycup sage (*Salvia farinacea*), and cupflower (*Nierembergia hippomanica*).

Licorice plant (*Helichrysum petiolare*), Persian shield (*Strobilanthes dyeranus*), and fanflower (*Scaevola aemula*).

Dahlberg daisy (*Dyssodia tenuiloba*), dwarf snapdragons (*Antirrhinum majus*), and star cluster (*Pentas lanceolata*).

Purple-leaved fountain grass (*Pennisetum setaceum* 'Rubrum'), melampodium (*Melampodium paludosum*), and golden ornamental sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas* 'Margarita').

Purple-leaved fountain grass (*Pennisetum setaceum* 'Rubrum'), red petunias (*Petunia x hybrida*), and Blackie ornamental sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas* 'Blackie').

Gartenmeister fuchsia (*Fuchsia* 'Gartenmeister'), Blackie ornamental sweet potato, (*Ipomoea batatas* 'Blackie') and pink/salmon geraniums (*Pelargonium x hortorum*).

Lantana (*Lantana camara*), Butterfly Yellow Cobbitty daisy (*Argeranthemum frutescens* 'Butterfly Yellow'), and summer wave torenia (*Torenia* 'Summer Wave').

Butterfly Yellow Cobbitty daisy (*Argeranthemum frutescens* 'Butterfly Yellow'), heliotrope (*Heliotropium arborescens*), and verbena (*Verbena* hybrids).

Coleus (*Solenostemon scutellarioides*), oregano (*Origanum vulgare*), sweet alyssum (*Lobularia maritima*), and star cluster (*Pentas lanceolata*).

Impatiens (*Impatiens wallerana*), wax begonia (*Begonia x semperflorens-cultorum*), and Japanese painted fern (*Athyrium nipponicum* 'Pictum').

Parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*), chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*), leaf lettuce (*Lactuca sativa*), and nasturtium (*Tropaeolum majus*).