



MID-ATLANTIC GROUP

# The Hardy Plant Society

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## Feature Article

# Four Season Container Gardening

by Michael Bowell

Container gardening has made quite a resurgence these past twenty odd years. When I started my garden business in 1986, container gardening consisted of mostly annuals and tender perennials that were treated as annuals in summer pots. Of the hardy plants that were utilized, woody plants, mostly evergreens, predominated. The exceptions were troughs and bonsai, which were cultivated by only the most serious of gardeners. Potted houseplants and conservatory specimens were frequently summered outdoors, but rarely integrated with annuals, other tender perennials, or hardy plants. Containers were usually heavy, expensive, or stylistically dated and rarely winter-hardy.

Today's incredible array of plant and container choices is staggering by comparison. Yet, I feel that most of us can do better on the finished product. So many container gardens, though lovely, are merely attractive collections or exuberant 'salads' in pots—lacking strong architectural elements and exhibiting little imagination or

stamina. I'd like to challenge you to rethink some of your potted gardens as year-round ornament,

three-dimensional forms of strong line and color that are dynamic, exciting, and sure to satisfy your horticultural and artistic cravings.

**Let's get started.** First, select an area that you view on a daily basis. Potential areas are your entry, porch, or a view from your kitchen workstation, study, desk, or easy chair. Study the space and its dimensions. Look at the total height, width, and depth of the area. Consider the space as you would if you were entering a 'defined space' or a niche design in a flower show.

**Next, think about three containers** in a 'three bears' type of size relationship: large, medium, and small. I am emphasizing here



a large pot that is a minimum of 24" wide by 20 " high; a medium pot, minimum 20" wide by 18" high; and a small pot, 16" to 24" wide and 15" high. The containers may be identical in shape and color, or com-

plementary. Since you are planning for a four season effect, you will need to use containers that are winter-hardy. Containers created from wood, metal, fiberglass, resin, and some varieties of ceramic or composition concrete planters work best. Terracotta and most types of ceramic pots are poor choices, because they tend to crack or exfoliate due to ice and snow. (Note: High-fired and frost-resistant terracotta, such as those manufactured in Italy ('Impruneta') and Crete and composition concrete or cast stone pots manufactured by Campania have fared extremely well over the past several winters for us in many of our clients' Philadelphia area gardens.)

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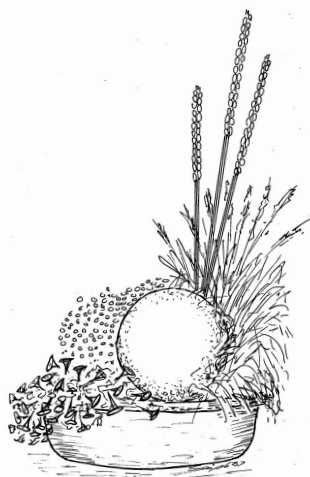
The key detail in over-wintering terracotta and cast stone pots is to keep them level. They should be set on pavers, slate, or other flat level surfaces, not in an area where snow and ice tend to accumulate. If you have a roof over the containers, you may use colorful ceramic pots. To ensure winter survival of the pots, you may set plastic containers within the ceramic pots, planting directly into the plastic pots, making sure that both the plastic and ceramic containers drain readily.

### ***Drainage is Key***

Now that your pots are in place, it's time to ensure good drainage before you add soil. Many containers, especially ceramic and terracotta types, have either no drainage holes or insufficient drainage holes. Be sure that there are holes in the base of the container; if there are none or if they are insufficient, you can drill holes. Next, it is time to add drainage media to the basal 5-10% of the container. If the containers are heavy, use lightweight media such as overturned plastic pots or packing styrofoam 'peanuts'. (Be sure not to use the biodegradable type, which break down.) If you are concerned about making your largest pots too heavy, you can create a false bottom by placing large overturned plastic pots in them to take up some of the volume, then adding screening or weed fabric to keep the soil from washing down. Placing feet under the pots also helps ensure drainage.

**The potting media** is the next

issue to consider. The type of media you use depends somewhat on what you are planting and the overall exposure. Soil mixes that drain well are especially important if the pots are fully exposed to rain. Heavier mixes or an anchor of gravel in the bottom with a light mix on top works well for lightweight pots and pots exposed to drying winds or sun. Heavy mixes also work



for large trees, shrubs, and evergreens, which can become top-heavy. I use primarily lightweight soilless mixes and add weight to the base of the pot if I am concerned about the pot toppling in summer thunderstorms or winter winds. Many times I will recycle heavier soil from previously planted containers into the bottoms of my newly planted pots, then add a layer of compost and top off with fresh mix. This keeps the top of the soil weed-free and requires less maintenance. Compost also works as a top dressing, but keep in mind that weed seeds will germinate in that top layer. Sheet moss helps retain moisture around plant roots and prevents the soil from washing and splattering in heavy rains or from overenthusiastic watering by less experienced gardeners.

### ***Fertilizer—for Containers a Must***

I add a slow release fertilizer to the soil mix as I prepare it, and add a bit more to the top after planting. Be mindful that most slow release fertilizers are not active when the soil temperature is cold (below 60°F). On the other hand, those

same fertilizers release rapidly when soil temperatures exceed 75°F and are readily leached away. So, a three- to four-month formulation will not work in cold spring weather and may well last only six to eight weeks in the heat of mid-summer. For most woody plants, this is not much of a problem, as they do not require much fertilization in the cooler months. Cool season, fast growing annuals and tender perennials, such as pansies and fuchsias, will benefit from liquid fertilizer or a compost tea in the cooler months, especially when they are young. The use of compost in general helps buffer the extremes of chemical fertilizers. Honestly, I use some of everything. I find that if annuals or other young plants need a quick fix to get moving or if the trees or shrubs are a bit chlorotic or nitrogen-starved, nothing beats fish emulsion or liquefied seaweed. And over the long run, good quality soil with compost added is best.

### ***Designing the Elements***

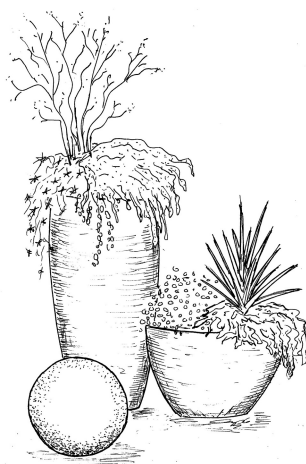
Okay, now for the exciting part. It is time to design with the plants. Although it may well now be shopping time for most of you, the real hard core among us probably has a stash of plants already awaiting a home.

To come up with a design and pot selection, you have already studied the area in its entirety and considered the total cubic space you would like to utilize. In an enclosed area, the parameters are already set. In an open area, you must consider the space in relation to the spaces around it. Visualize your containerized area as a unit. Think of it as a sculpture, as opposed to a painting. Its features shall be expressed in height, width, and depth. Place your containers, starting with the tallest at the rear left or rear right of center. Use the medium height pot in the

center area and the shortest one in the foreground. These containers are the basis for your four season design. You can add contrasting or complementary pots or components (think holiday decorations, cut branches, glitter wands, potted bulbs or summering houseplants) to **create a dynamic scene** over the seasons.

**Development of a color scheme** may be dictated somewhat by the surrounding area. Since this is a four season design, I would start with my evergreen selection. Do I go with yellow greens or blue greens, cool colors or warm colors? Then I consider light and wind. Remember that the soil freezes in the winter and broadleaved evergreens are easily damaged by drying winds and the plants' inability to absorb moisture from the frozen soil. If the pots are placed in the garden area, you may use broadleaved evergreens to better advantage planted in the soil as part of your composition. On a porch, you can coddle these same potted evergreens with weekly doses of 50° to 60° water over the winter months. Most needle (pine, spruce, or yew) or scaly (juniper or chamaecyparis) evergreens are much better adapted to winter pot culture than broadleaved evergreens, as they are less likely to desiccate due to lack of available water. Complementary evergreens include Korean boxwood (many forms, all extremely hardy) and the ever colorful varied forms of euonymus. Antidesiccants such as Wiltpruf can help ensure survival of the evergreens and also serve as a deer deterrent. (We have noted that the broadleaf evergreens that we treat with antidesiccants are less prone to deer munching than those untreated evergreens.)

Plant the tallest woody plants or those with the most linear outline in the largest container, either at rear or mid-depth. Add a contrasting shape, more rounded, into the next largest pot, again at the rear or middle area. Use a trailing form with contrasting texture in the lowest container and if space allows, repeat this same plant in one or more of the other pots. Contrasting evergreen form and color can be provided by the same plant, such as yucca or aucuba. (Although aucuba, camellia, cryptomeria, and even leucothoe are sensitive to winter cold and desiccation in containers, they serve well from March through



December and can spend the balance of the year in the ground or in a protected location.) Evergreen plants and dwarf conifers that have had a successful track record for me include sciadopitys, variegated and dwarf pines, most forms and colors of chamaecyparis, abies, ilex, and juniper. Deciduous plants include blueberries (flowers, fruit and red winter stem color), azaleas, hypericum, taxodium, dogwood, holly, cotinus, and the many colored foliage forms of sambucus and forsythia. A great flowering plant is *Rosa* 'Peach Drift', a new introduction from Star Roses that is incredibly disease-resistant and literally flowers for seven months (two plus seasons).

**Herbaceous perennials** provide the next layer to your composition and add a dynamic and reliable

element. Some of my favorites are hakonechloa, cimicifuga, begonia, lilies, rogersia, ligularia, trollius, Japanese anemone, Christmas fern, autumn fern, painted fern, and hosta for shade. All are long-lived and foolproof, as are daylilies, hardy salvias, sedums, asters, echinacea, artemesias, Siberian and Japanese iris, hardy hibiscus, lavenders, and dianthus for sunny locations. *Lysimachia nummularia* 'Aurea' performs well in shade and sun if kept adequately moist.

**Annuals and tender perennials** are colorful and dynamic fillers. My absolute favorites are lantanas (their multihued flowers are perfect to tie surrounding colors together), cane begonias, calibrachoa, dahlias, and impatiens. These all require minimal upkeep except for staking and deadheading the dahlias, and combating budworm on the calibrachoa with an organic pesticide.

**Summering houseplants** (conservatory plants) such as hibiscus, abutilon, bromeliads, brugmansia, palms, begonias, anthuriums, ferns, orchids, tillandsias, fuchsias, tibouchina, heliconias, citrus, crinum, gardenia, clivia, and agapanthus all will do well out of doors for some months of the year and can add instant drama to your containerized garden display.

**Pest control**, other than budworms, is something I rarely do. Deer and rabbits are repelled best with Liquid Fence, though most plants in containers have fewer problems with these pesky herbivores due to their elevation and proximity to dwellings.

**Long term maintenance** of your containerized garden area involves mostly light feeding and seasonal thinning and pruning. Removing the top few inches of soil and replacing it with fresh media will discourage weed seed germination. Some plants may

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perform best if they are rotated on occasion, either in their existing containers or into adjacent containers. Some herbaceous plants will need to be divided, so that they will not upset the visual balance. Woody plants that do not respond well to pruning, such as spruces and pines, may outgrow their containers in a few years and require transplanting into the garden, where they can continue to develop.

Drainage holes should be checked and reopened at least annually. The best time is during either autumn cleaning or spring planting. Be especially mindful of any pots that have settled into the soil. These are prime candidates for drainage issues that can lead to a rapid decline in plant health—again, placing containers on a level hard surface, a bed of gravel, or raisers (feet) will prevent this problem.

#### *A Sample Four Season Planter Composition for Medium Shade*

**In March**, plant three pots using a five-foot *Chamaecyparis obtusa* in the largest pot and a *Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Strathmore' (gold mop cypress) in the foreground pot. Plant a coral twig dogwood *Cornus sericea* 'Cardinal' in the center pot. Add *Euonymus fortunei* 'Moonshadow' to both front pots at the base of the gold mop cypress and dogwood, respectively. Plant one *Yucca filamentosa* 'Color Guard' in the largest pot and repeat it in the smallest. Add solid yellow pansies, red pansies, and golden variegated ivy *Hedera helix* 'Goldchild' to all of the pots.

**In April**, about mid month, is the time to add plants that can take heavy frosts into the upper 20°s F and provide temporary color. Add pots of budded ranunculus and holiday plants such as flowering bulbs and azaleas that are now readily available. Make sure to

plant tulips and narcissus a bit deeper than they were in their original containers to help support them. You might also use some deciduous branches for support. Remember that newly added plants might require additional moisture, as their roots are not yet established into the entire soil mass.

**In May**, add a fourth pot—your orange *Clivia miniata* that you brought outdoors a month earlier and have kept in a shaded place to prevent sun scald. Chances are it will repeat flowering in early summer, since it has experienced cool night temperatures. Replace spent bulbs with *Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola' to the medium and low containers. Add late flowering orange tulips to the medium container. You shall replace these spent tulips later in the month with an upright growing *Fuchsia* x 'Gartenmeister Bonstedt'. A fifth low trailing pot (easiest is a hanging basket placed on the ground) may now enhance your composition.

**In mid-June**, remove the dogwood and plant it in the ground behind the largest pot or in another area of your garden. Add a salmon/coral cane-type begonia *Begonia coccinea* to the pot vacated by the dogwood and replace the waning pansies with salmon and red impatiens. Add a chartreuse *Hosta* 'Sum and Substance' to the rear pot and an *Acorus gramineus* 'Variegatus' to the front pot. Add a sixth pot behind the others filled with yellow variegated ginger *Alpinia zerumbet* 'Variegata'. This combination will look great through the summer months. Of course, you can always add an orange flowering bromeliad, *Guzmania* 'Orange Crush', and some tall candles for a mid-summer party.

Keep your container plantings groomed by removing all dead foliage, flowers, and stems to prevent disease. Some plants shall

need to be coached by removing or simply adjusting some stems and foliage to allow space for neighboring plants to develop.

**Prior to frost**, remove the cane begonia and take to a sunny window indoors. Put the potted ginger in a protected location.

**After a light frost**, move the clivia to a more protected location. After a heavy frost, cut out the impatiens and remove the fuchsia. Plant *Narcissus* 'Fortissimo' bulbs in one of the pots and fill in empty areas with pansies.

**In December**, cut some of that coral twig dogwood and add those branches to your pots with an assortment of cut greens and branches of *Ilex verticillata* 'Winter Gold', along with some gold and red glass balls, metal gazing globes, or 'Simple's Reflector Wands'. Use an assortment of upright, spreading, and cascading cut greens to complement the bright and colorful euonymus and yuccas. Treating the cut greens, deciduous and berried branches, and potted plants with antidesiccants, in addition to keeping moisture in the pots, will add longevity. You can easily replace the browning branches of cut greens and holly over the winter months and add a white flowering hellebore in late winter as you conjure ideas for the seasons ahead!



Michael Bowell is a gardener by vocation and avocation who has a keen interest in both hardy and tropical plants. He is a flower show judge and an accredited American Orchid Society judge who has exhibited for twenty-five years in various flower shows. His company, 'Create a Scene' of Malvern, PA, creates and develops gardens for a select clientele and has recently combined forces with his partner, Simple, in designing for horticultural trade shows. Michael also lectures frequently to orchid and plant societies on various aspects of design, exhibition, and horticulture. He resides with his three schnauzers and assorted cats, reptiles, turkeys, chickens, peafowl, and ducks in Charlestown Twp. in Chester County, PA.