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WINTER HOURS

7:00 am to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday
Closed Weekends and Holidays

UPCOMING EVENTS

JANUARY 9

Annual Pruning Seminar

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV. Sponsored by the Nevada Cooperative Extension. Free lectures and demonstrations in English and Spanish. Contact: Karen Dyka at 702.257.5530

JANUARY 13-15

Utah Green Industry Conference and Trade Show

Dixie Center, St. George, UT. Contact: UNLA at 801.484.4426 or visit: www.utahgreen.org

JANUARY 22

18th Annual Western Tree Management Symposium

Los Angeles County Arboretum, Arcadia, CA. Sponsored by Street Tree Seminar, Inc. Contact: Greg Monfette at 213.485.5675 or Rose Epperson at 714.991.1900.

JANUARY 28-30

ProGreen EXPO

Colorado Convention Center, Denver, CO. Contact: ProGreen EXPO at 800.EXPO665 or 303.756.1079 or visit: www.progreenexpo.com

JANUARY 29-30

Think Trees New Mexico

Albuquerque Marriott Pyramid North, Albuquerque, NM. Contact: Bernalillo County Extension Service at 505.243.1386

FEBRUARY 12

Nevada Landscape Association Trade Show and Conference

Reno Hilton, Reno, NV. Contact: Debra Rae Drew at 775.673.0404 or 800.645.9794 or visit: www.nevadaanla.com

FEBRUARY 18-19

2003 Landscape Industry Show sponsored by the California Landscape Contractors Association

Long Beach Convention Center, Long Beach, CA. Contact: CLCA at 916.830.2780 or visit: www.clca.org

CONTAINER GARDENING

As landscapes shrink to postage stamp dimensions due to urban sprawl, many people feel that they no longer have the space to enjoy gardening. While it might be true that large expanses of lawn and row after row of vegetables are quickly becoming a thing of the past, there is no reason to give up this enjoyable and healthy pastime. We can raise virtually anything we want in containers, provided we do a bit of planning.

Containerized gardening dates back centuries, as our ancestors sought to recreate the beauty of nature within the confines of their own hearth. Perhaps the earliest masters of containerized gardening were the Japanese who trained otherwise enormous trees into miniature specimens of exquisite beauty. While not all of us have the patience and discipline required to create decade old bonsai trees, most should be able to sustain a few patio plants.

Container gardening is really very simple. There are a few basic requirements to ensure success: the selection of quality containers, preparation of a suitable soil mix, and the discovery of the right plant for your location. We need to pay attention to our maintenance requirements as well, such as irrigation, pruning practices and fertilization, but these are nominal concerns. So let's get started with the nuts and bolts.

The style and shape of your pots is strictly personal preference. Some people like to develop themes, such as terracotta or bright colors. Others prefer to mix and match a variety of containers

by selecting ceramic, plastic and metal to hold their plants. One of the most important criteria for pottery selection is longevity. Purchase the most durable materials you can afford, and you will find the containers will last much longer.

For example, clay pots of Mexican origin may be less expensive but might only last one season before the alkalinity within our water causes them to break down into a glob of red goop. Slightly higher priced Italian clay pottery will often last for many seasons. If you choose a porous clay container, be sure to coat the interior with a clay pot sealer. This will reduce the efflorescence of salt (which looks like a white powder) on the surface. Otherwise consider porcelain pottery available for a few pennies more. Oh, and don't forget the saucers as they should be sealed as well.

If you decide to use plastic pots, keep a few things in mind. Select containers without a crevice or opening along the lower edge of the rim. This is a great place for bugs to hide. Pots with solid rims leave spiders looking for a new home. Also, remember that these pots weigh less and provide you the opportunity to choose larger containers. In fact, some of the newer containers on the market are featherweights, constructed of tough molded polyethylene or high-density foam-like polyurethane. Both are fairly durable, withstanding drops and bumps, and they are virtually freeze resistant.

Container size is determined by the available room. Small areas such as doorways or balconies will accommodate tall, narrow pots or tiered plant stands capable of holding several layers of pots. Large patios with more room for hefty vessels or vertical racks will hold two to three rows of containers. Staggering the height of similar pots always looks stylish.

Soil types are as variable as the containers. If you use a container of a porous nature such as terracotta, we recommend a soil mix that retains water longer, as moisture evaporates through clay surfaces and plants tend to dry out faster. The addition of peat or other sources of organic matter will help to increase the water holding capacity of the soil.

If you plan to use containers of a non-porous nature such as metal, porcelain or plastic, then a well-drained mix may be more appropriate as moisture loss is not a factor with these containers. We have found that over watering tends to cause more plant loss than any other practice. The addition of perlite, sand or gravel will improve porosity of the soil.

Remember that cacti, native and water-efficient plants prefer to dry out thoroughly between irrigations. In contrast, herbaceous perennials often require more consistent, even moisture. Choose your soil mix accordingly. By keeping several additives on hand, most soils may be easily modified.

Now for the fun part! The plant selection is totally up to your imagination. There are dozens of plants that may be used singularly in containers but clustering can add interest and texture. Obviously the smaller containers are perfect for miniature specimens. Even plants that eventually become quite large may be retained in a little pot for some time. Small agave plants such as the *Agave bracteosa*, *A. schidigera* Durango Delight™ and the ever popular Queen Victoria agave are some examples. Eventually these small plants may be transplanted to larger containers or if suitable, simply relocated within the landscape.

For larger containers, consider majestic plants with bold colors. The variegated agaves such as the *Agave americana v. mediopicta* with its center stripe of white or gold is a great stand alone specimen. So is the variegated form of the *Agave desmettiana* with its gently recurving leaves. Be sure to leave some room to maneuver around plants that have sharp spines or teeth.

Aloes are great solo choices as well. Some have prickles while others have smooth leaves. Many of us keep a pot of the medicinal aloe, *Aloe barbadensis (A. vera)* on the patio near the kitchen. Otherwise known as the "first aid plant" the slippery juice from a stem soothes a minor burn or scrape. Remember that not all aloes have this function and some may cause discomfort from dermatitis. The *Aloe variegata* or the Partridge Breast Aloe offers leaves with dazzling spots of creamy white, while the Blue Elf Aloe has delicate blue-green leaves in tight bunches. Both produce slender stalks of exquisite red or orange flowers. Larger aloes include the wonderful *Aloe dawei*, *A. ferox* and *A. marlothii*, each with massive rosettes of bold leaves that produce large flowers

stalks. Be sure to give these fellows some elbow room.

One of the most striking succulents is the *Pedilanthus macrocarpus* or Lady's Slipper. This Baja California native is fairly cold tender so it will be a winter houseplant for locations outside of USDA Zone 9. The strong vertical form of the slender, leafless stalks topped with delicate red and orange slipper-shaped flowers is unique in any container. This plant is a virtual hummingbird magnet so place it outside your office or dining room window and be prepared for lots of winged company!

Of course, there are numerous choices other than succulent plants. For example, many of the ornamental grasses are fabulous container plants. You might be familiar with the wonderful genus *Muhlenbergia*, of which there are many species suitable for stand alone use in containers. Consider the delicate, misty plumes of Regal Mist™ or the strongly vertical golden spikes of Autumn Glow™. Of particular note is *Panicum virgatum* 'Prairie Sky' with its steely blue-green foliage and pinkish flower plumes. Don't forget the wonderful swishing leaves of the Mexican Feather Grass, *Nassella (Stipa)*, reminiscent of a hula skirt. A new plant for us is the dwarf form of the familiar Pampas Grass, *Cortaderia selloana* 'Pumila.' It looks quite similar to the larger version, only diminutive.

Want more color in your containerized landscape? We have had particular success in containers with some of our newer shrubs. You may wish to try the genus *Tecoma*, including the yellow flowering *T. stans v. stans* 'Gold Star' and the burnished orange blossoms of Sunrise™. A great patio plant is found in the *Malpighia emarginata* 'Mariquita' with its diminutive stature, clusters of pink flowers and small, edible fruit. Even though

Duranta erecta 'Sweet Memory' eventually becomes a large shrub, it can serve as a great container plant for quite a while, producing nodding bouquets of purple flowers lined with white margins. Speaking of color, the Gopher Plant, *Euphorbia rigida* adds fantastic blue green foliage with chartreuse flowers.

If you are heavy handed with the watering can consider the aptly named Bat-faced Cuphea, which has marvelous red and black flowers surprisingly bat-like in appearance. Or try the Fernclover, *Marsilea macropoda*, which will make you the envy of any Leprechaun. Both like evenly moist soils.

Many plants commonly referred to as wildflowers are suitable for placement in pots. Often referred to affectionately as 'roadside weeds' they easily handle the rigors of urban life. Consider nearly all of the species within the genus *Penstemon*. Commonly known as the Beardtongues, these plants offer a wide range of blooming periods and a rainbow of colors. All are hummingbird lures. Be careful not to over water.

Next are the wonderful globe mallows. The species may vary in pastel hues of pink, orange, white and lavender while cultivars Louis Hamilton™ and Papago Pink™ offer more prominent shades of watermelon red and deep pink, respectively. Dogweed, *Thymophylla pentachaeta*, and the Angelita Daisy, *Tetraneuris acaulis*, are also worthy of containers, producing mounds of yellow flowers. The prostrate germander, *Teucrium chamaedrys* 'Prostratum' is a great trailing plant bearing purple flower spikes.

Interested in larger flowers? Try any of the evening primroses. The Mexican Evening Primrose, *Oenothera speciosa* 'Siskiyou' is great for masses of pink blossoms, while *O. caespitosa*

has large, white flowers and *O. stubbei* has yellow. All three will spill over the edge to produce sprawling masses of color. The Sundrops, *Calylophus hartwegii v. fendleri* also produces similarly shaped yellow blossoms. Don't forget the Verbenas, as 'Edith' and Summer Beauty™ look great trailing over a pot's edge.

Other cascading plants that will love spilling over onto your patio are the fleabanes, *Erigeron divergens* and *E. karvinskianus* 'Profusion' with their tiny daisy-like flowers. Succulent trailers include the Rocky Point ice plant, *Malephora lutea*, and the purple flowering *Drosanthemum speciosum*. *Lantana* 'New Gold' or the ever-popular *Lantana montevidensis* with purple hues are both great container plants. *Russelia equisetiformis*, or the Coral Fountain, will brighten any sunny location with its brilliant crimson flowers. The latter three will require some protection from frost to remain evergreen, preferring a sunny, but covered patio.

Looking for plants that can climb on a trellis? Look no further than *Antigonon leptopus* 'Baja Red' with its scarlet fall flowers. Both *Vitis californica* 'Roger's Red' and *Parthenocissus* sp. Hacienda Creeper™ will produce red foliage in the fall. Pink Trumpet Vine, *Podranea ricasoleana* has a large desert willow-like flower. Completing the list are the yellow and purple orchid vines of the genus *Callaeum*, which make wonderful trellis plants.

Plants with fragrance add yet another element to the container landscape. Chocolate flower, *Berlandieri lyrata* has daisy-like blossoms that produce aromas that rival a candy factory. *Poliomintha maderensis*, or Lavender Spice™

has foliage that smells much like sweet oregano when crushed. And certainly don't leave out the rosemary. We produce two prostate forms in 'Arp' and 'Huntington Carpet' and one upright form, 'Tuscan Blue'. All three have the distinctive herbal perfume, along with blue flowers.

The real creative juices start flowing when large containers are utilized to allow for mixing partners. Floral groupings are wonderful ways to enjoy all your plants in small spaces. Just be sure to mix plants with similar moisture requirements. Generally succulents go well together. Or try grasses and perennials together. When using plants that go dormant in the winter such as the *Tecoma*, *Caryopteris* or *Buddleja*, place groupings of short perennials around the base of the shrub to provide interest during the winter. Experiment with a variety of selections to create swirls of texture and vibrant mixtures of color.

Here are a few combinations we have successfully put together. They are pleasing to the eye and satisfy our call to garden.

Large containers:

Lady's Slipper in the center, surrounded by Angelita Daisies and *Agave bracteosa*.

Duranta 'Sweet Memory' encircled with Fleabane and Verbena Summer Beauty™.

Eremophila racemosa with a few Mexican Evening Primrose along the edge.

Tecoma 'Gold Star' embraced with a mix of Dwarf Ruellia in blue, white and pink.

'Prairie Sky' Switch Grass in the center, coupled with Partridge Breast Aloe, a small agave such as *Agave desmettiana*, intermingled with Fleabane and Angelita Daisy.

For medium sized containers:

Hesperaloe parviflora in the center with *Conoclinium greggii* Boothill™ along the edge.

Malpighia emarginata 'Mariquita' surrounded by Verbena 'Edith'.

Coral Fountain in the center with plantings of white rain lilies around the margin.

For smaller containers:

Stick with the solo plants mentioned previously or use small combinations with bold contrasts. An example would be the strong purple pads of *Opuntia santa-rita* Tubac™ paired with the delicate white flowers of fleabane. Or try the exquisite spotted foliage of *Manfreda maculosa* alongside the yellow flowers of *Psilostrophe tagentina*, the paper flower. Or how about the lovely purple flowers of *Salvia farinacea* Texas Violet™ opposite *Muhlenbergia* Nashville™?

The combinations are endless; just remember to place compatible plants together. Be careful to not over water. Fertilizer should be used sparingly as well, as most desert plants don't require a lot of nutrition. An occasional application of a water soluble fertilizer should be adequate. Relocate plants seasonally to adjust for changes in the weather. Remember to "deadhead" plants like Angelita Daisy, *Penstemon* and *Ruellia* so that new flowers are produced instead of seed.

We hope you will audition a few of our plant selections for your container gardening. Be bold; be creative! Enjoy your ability to mix containers and plant textures. Have fun moving them about the foyer, patio, and pool. Remember, the combinations are endless.

To see photos of these plants and more, check out our website at www.mswn.com