

# Contained Excitement:



A mixed container focused on foliage can be as vibrant as one that relies on flowers—without as much maintenance.

BY NANCY J. ONDRA

**I**F YOU'RE looking to make a big impact in a small space, container plantings should be on your list of must-do garden projects this summer. There's no need for heavy work like digging and mulching; no huge budget for dozens of plants; no worries about getting stuck with design or planting mistakes for years to come. Just add water and a bit of fertilizer and you can enjoy colorful container plantings all season long. If you need help getting started with container gardening, see the sidebar on page 32.

From a design standpoint, flowering plants are an obvious choice for colorful containers. I encourage you to give at least one foliage-focused combination a try, though. These days, it's easy to find lovely leaves in practically any color, and their shapes and sizes are as diverse as those offered by blooming plants. Best of all, unlike those with showy flowers, plants with ornamental foliage tend to look great from the time you plant them until frost calls a halt to the growing season.

## PICKING THE PLANTS

In a garden, it's important to match the plants you choose with your climate and site, and to a certain extent, that's true for containers, too. Plants that need shade and those that demand lots of sun probably won't do well in the same planter, for instance. But if you pair plants that can take full sun to part shade, or combine those that like part to full shade, you can

Landscape designer Todd Holloway of Pot Incorporated in Vancouver, British Columbia, is known for his creative container plantings. This lively, richly textured, foliage-centric design features black-leaved *Aeonium* 'Zwartkop', variegated alocasia, coppery-red coleus, and peach-and-green-striped *Phormium* 'Sundowner', with 'Wilma's Gold' rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) draping over the container's edge. Flowering Superbells® Coralberry Punch™ hybrid calibrachoa is tucked into the arrangement as an accent.



# Luscious, Lovely Leaves



Top left: Coleus comes in so many guises that a container of it alone creates a dramatic effect. Bottom left: A more sophisticated color scheme is represented by this mix of *Carex buchananii*, *Haloragis erecta* 'Wellington Bronze', and *Ipomoea batatas* 'Sweet Caroline Bronze'. Above: When designing with foliage, there is a wealth of colors, textures, and shapes to work with, as shown here with *Hakonechloa macra* 'All Gold', *Heuchera Dolce* 'Blackberry Ice', *Pilea involucrata* 'Norfolk', *Lamium maculatum* 'White Nancy', and *Vinca major* 'Maculata'.



## GETTING STARTED WITH CONTAINER GARDENING

There are many benefits to container gardening. The first is that you don't need a lot of space, and you can grow plants even if all you have is a balcony or window box. Then, just as artwork and knick-knacks give an interior room a finished look, well-chosen container plantings can serve as design accessories around the outside of your home—by your front door, for example, or near a pool. Desperate for privacy on your deck or patio? A collection of pots and planters can block the view of eyesores, screen out nosy neighbors, and give exposed outdoor living spaces a sense of enclosure within just a few weeks.

From a practical standpoint, containers make it much easier to supply the right conditions for the plants you want to grow. Where the weather's too dry for moisture-lovers to thrive, or the soil stays too wet for succulents to survive, pop those plants in a pot and tailor your watering routine to suit their specific needs. Or maybe your yard is too shady for your favorite plants, but you do get sun on your porch steps or by your side door. Find the right site, set a container there, and plant away!

Getting plants up off the ground puts them within easier reach for planting and grooming, too. Containers can also keep your plants safe from voles and other small critters—possibly even deer, if you keep the pots close to your house.

### CHOOSING CONTAINERS

An “investment” container—one that makes a statement even without plants in it—can easily cost several hundred dollars, but with care, you can enjoy it for many years to come. If you'd rather put your money into the plants than into the pot, however, go for a less expensive plastic or clay planter from a garden center; you can even repurpose any used item for a container as long as it can hold a fair amount of soil.

If you already know where you want to place the container, look for one with the right proportions for the site. It's best to go big, if you can. A small container is charming next to a bench or on a balcony, but looks insignificant on an expanse of paving, such as a pool deck. Small pots also limit your plant choices, need more careful watering, and are more prone to getting knocked over. Larger pots are more expensive to fill because you need lots of potting soil and plants, but they greatly expand your planting options, and they make a big visual impact. They tend to be more stable in windy sites, too, and need less frequent watering.

Drainage is also something to think about. Unless you're planning on a container water garden, there needs to be some way to keep roots from sitting in constantly soggy soil. Usually, that's accomplished through holes in the base. Not all containers have pre-cut holes, though, so check the bottom before you buy.

### START WITH THE SOIL

Just like garden soil, potting soil needs to strike a good balance of moisture and air for roots to thrive. Most potting soils are based on a combination of peat moss and larger-particled materials, such as pine bark, perlite, and vermiculite. Though you can mix your own potting soil, it's usually more practical to buy a commercially-made blend. Most soilless potting mixes will work fine for container combinations, because you can control the moisture and nutrient levels by adding more or less water and fertilizer. After you've filled your container with the appropriate mix, the fun part starts—figuring out what you want to plant!

—N.J.O.



A sun-dappled location by an entrance is perfect for this collection of plants that prefer part shade, among them *Fatsia japonica* 'Spider's Web', hybrid hellebores, *Hedera helix* 'Gold Child', and *Cephalotaxus harringtonia*.





## CARING FOR YOUR CONTAINER GARDEN

Keeping any potted combination looking its best takes just a few minutes every day or two for watering, fertilizing, and grooming, depending on the weather.

**Watering wisely.** Smart watering starts even before you put the plants in place. Peat- or coir-based potting mixes, in particular, can be hard to moisten thoroughly, so it's wise to do so before you add plants. Next, make sure the root balls of the plants are thoroughly moistened by



**Above left:** The striking foliage of *Aeonium* 'Zwartkop' rises tall in this Todd Holloway-designed planter filled with assorted succulents, including *Agave attenuata*, *Euphorbia tirucalli* 'Sticks on Fire', sedum, echeveria, aloe, and sempervivum. **Above, right:** Although this container features blooming gerbera daisies and calibrachoa, the burgundy and copper-colored leaves of *Heuchera* 'Peach Melba', New Zealand flax (*Phormium* spp.), and coleus clearly take center stage. Gray-leaved dwarf licorice plant (*Helichrysum petiolare* 'Petite Licorice') provides pleasing contrast.

move the container if you find that they want more or less light than you were giving them. Hardiness isn't much of an issue with containers, either, especially if you're planting them for just one growing season and discarding the plants in fall. If you do want to include plants that normally don't survive the cold outdoors in your area, you can bring the container (or the individual plants) indoors for the winter.

When you're shopping for foliage prospects, make sure you hit all corners

of your favorite garden center, not just the bedding-plant displays. Old standbys such as coleus (*Solenostemon scutellarioides*, syn. *Plectranthus scutellarioides*) are a good start, but also check out the hardy perennials, shrubs, houseplants, and even vegetables. Herbs are wonderful for adding fragrance, and succulents are outstanding for interesting shapes and colors. The photographs on the pages of this article are sure to provide ideas for your own creative combinations.

watering until the excess runs out of the bottom of their pots. Once all the plants are in place, fill in around their root balls with moistened potting soil, leaving some space between the rim of the pot and the top of the potting soil, so water or rain won't just run off the top. Then, water the whole collection thoroughly to settle the potting soil around the roots and remove any large air pockets. Add more potting soil, if needed, to re-level the surface.





Horticulturist Paul Zammit of the Toronto Botanical Garden designed this light-and-dark foliage composition with *Cordyline australis* 'Red Star', *Canna* 'Pretoria', yellow lacy-leaved *Sambucus racemosa* 'Sutherland Gold', and *Ipomoea batatas* 'Illusion Emerald Lace' and 'Blackie'.

After that, water just enough to keep the potting soil from drying out. In general, containers dry out less quickly when the weather is cool, cloudy, or rainy; when they are made out of non-porous materials, such as plastic or resin; when the plants are small; and when you use a potting mix with "moisture control" ingredients, such as water-holding gels. Conversely, you'll need to water more often when the plants are growing vigorously; when the weather's hot, sunny, and/or windy; and when they're growing in porous clay or wood containers.

**Fertilizing.** While frequent fertilizing is a must for flowering pots, foliage-based containers are much more forgiving. Commercial potting soils that include slow-release fertilizer provide a small, steady supply of nutrients that can be enough to keep leafy plants looking lovely for the entire season. If you didn't use such a mix, or if you want your containers to look especially lush, consider applying a liquid fertilizer. Check the label of the product you choose for specific instructions.

**Grooming your container garden.** Foliage-focused planters need a lot less grooming than flower-filled ones, because you don't need to regularly remove faded blooms. Once a week or so, pinch or snip off dead or damaged leaves, including those around the base of the plants, where crowding and moisture can lead to rotting and provide great hiding places for insect pests. If one or more of the plants are crowding out the others, trim out some of the biggest leaves or most vigorous stems to keep all of the plants in proportion to each other, and in scale with the container, too.

Once you see how beautiful a container of foliage can be, and how easy it is to maintain, you'll never limit yourself to flowers. 🌿

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