

Pro Tips for Container Gardening in All Climates

BY MARY-KATE MACKEY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTINA SALWITZ

Beautifully designed containers can thrive in challenging environments if you know these tricks of the trade.

“The jewelry of the garden.” That’s what Northwest garden designer Christina Salwitz calls beautifully designed and well-placed containers. Like jewelry, containers allow you to change the plants each year or with the seasons to suit your fancy. “They add personality,” she says. “If you craft a great entry to your home with welcoming, interesting, and creative containers—that says a lot about who you are.”

Christina should know. For 25 years she’s been designing and maintaining containers for homes in the Seattle area. As the solo entrepreneur behind The Personal Garden Coach, she’s been help-



Christina Salwitz creates high-impact containers, such as this one contrasting the red-orange hues of scarlet sage, cockscomb, and coleus with the green foliage of sweet potato vine, sedum, and canna.



ing gardeners get the most out of their landscapes with customized consultation and design services. She's also a photographer and a teacher of container design for industry events, garden centers, and garden clubs around the U.S. Her clients often want containers to be sited in tricky situations such as baking sun, deep shade, and high wind—challenges that are found in many gardens around the country. Here are Christina's hard-won observations that will help every pot become a jewel throughout the seasons no matter where you live.

CONTAINERS AND TECHNIQUES FOR EXTREME WEATHER

According to Christina, all successful combinations start with the pots. "One of the mistakes my clients make is to prefer a grouping of small pots, rather than one large one," she says. Unless you are a collector of specimens, such as Japanese maples, that need to be shown off in their own space, Christina



For best results, use the largest containers practical and fill them completely with a quality potting soil.

says, "It's better to choose a larger pot and fill it with a mix of plants."

In addition to size, the other consideration is what the pot is made of. Her

favorite containers are those manufactured in Vietnam. "These are made with a dark resilient clay from a cold part of Vietnam," she says. "The clay contains a lot of sand and is thick and heavy. It makes for a good frost-tolerant pottery." Vietnamese clay pottery is available at many gardening retail stores or can be purchased from online sources. Cast concrete containers marketed as frost-proof are alternatives.

For extra weather protection in very cold climates, Christina lines the pots with bubble wrap inside. (This is a good way to repurpose bubble wrap from packaging.) The wrap creates an insulating barrier between the soil and the pot's interior surface.

Christina also uses the *slipper* technique, where a similarly-sized black plastic pot—often a repurposed nursery container—is inserted inside the ceramic one. "This helps hold water in very hot weather, since it won't be absorbed into the interior clay, which is usually left unglazed," she says. The slipper is also useful for pots with shoulders—those graceful containers where the opening is smaller than its widest diameter. Yes, the growing space the shoulder provides is lost when a straight-sided slipper goes inside, but at repotting time, the slipper does just that, sliding out of the container without the trouble of hacking at roots embedded in the bulging shoulder.

Hefty pots can be placed on casters or a plant caddy if you plan on moving them.

MIX IT UP

Choosing a good container mix is vital. Christina says, "Potting soil is the foundation for everything successful I do other than the actual design." Her advice? "Get the soil that works for you and your climate."

Better soil mixes are usually light and friable. "If a bag feels way too heavy, hard as a brick, and doesn't loosen when it's dropped," Christina says, "look at something else." For plants that have specific needs—such as citrus, orchids, cacti—

Containers of varying heights and textures—one featuring a dwarf arborvitae trained as a standard—are grouped together to create a collective focal point.







Above: In this formal container, Christina Salwitz turned to a bold-textured arrangement of 'Red Sister' ti plant (*Cordyline fruticosa*), *Alocasia* × *amazonica* 'Polly', velvet plant (*Gynura aurantiaca*), and 'Neon' golden pothos (*Epipremnum aureum*). Opposite: A dark red container accentuates the tropical hues of 'Cherry Sensation' pink ti plant (*Cordyline australis*), *Coccoloba*™ 'Enchanted Sunrise' begonia, and 'Genii' hardy fuchsia.

Christina advises buying ready-made mixes. "Why make up your own?" she says, "Companies have been working on the science of these mixes for a long time. Take advantage of their knowledge."

DESIGN FOR SUCCESS

Christina likes to allow the plants and shape of the container to dictate the design. She considers the classic proportions of one-third container height to two-thirds plant height, but allows for circumstances to decide the final look. "If you have a view," she says, "you might not want tall plants in a pot interrupting it."

Her basic design guideline: "Three heights, three textures, three colors." If there are only three plants in a pot, each one would work with the other two to fulfill all the criteria. That would bring a variety of size, form, and color. More plants in the pot create more possibilities in the three categories and allow them to intermingle in a natural way. This idea takes you beyond the old formula of combining a thriller, filler, and spiller. Christina says, "There's no requirement to follow a rigid recipe that doesn't let you think creatively. Not every plant has to dance around a center spiky one."

SOME LIKE IT HOT

Many container combinations are happy in full sun, but locations with reflective surfaces—driveways, patios, and sunny south-facing walls, for example—can get fiercely hot. So special care must be taken with plant choices. Look for those that have evolved in parts of the world with these same tough conditions. Plants from Mediterranean regions do well. "Herbs with fuzzy leaves—like lavenders—that prevent moisture loss, are a good choice," Christina says. "And succulents of all kinds come to mind."

"Sometimes plants from radically different locations go well together," she says. "Consider tropicals mixed with succulents for surprising and unusual combinations." Here a very spacious container offers the best chance for success. "Be sure the tropicals are generally on one side of the pot and succulents on the other," Christina says, "and be mindful to water more on one side than another." One combination she favors



Left: A variegated fatsia, orange primroses, miniature daffodils, and sedge mingle in this spring container for shade. **Bottom left:** For windy sites, choose open-framework plants such as weeping cypress, shore pine, and purple fountain grass.

is using dragon tree (*Dracaena marginata*)—a common houseplant—as an annual, with *Sedum* ‘Dazzleberry’ and *S. rupestre* ‘Angelina’ to create a reliable summer show in hot environments.

SOME PREFER DEEP SHADE

Seriously dense shade is often found under trees and large shrubs with surface roots. These are the places where containers come into their own. For plants in general, Christine says, the bigger and softer the leaf, the more shade it will take. She uses what she calls “the big three”—begonias, impatiens, and fuchsias. Often, she adds hostas, preferring those that feature large dramatic leaves that slugs and snails tend to avoid, such as *Hosta* ‘Blue Mammoth’ or *H.* ‘Gentle Giant’. She also incorporates shade-loving houseplants, such as Japanese aralia (*Fatsia japonica*) and cast-iron plant (*Aspidistra elatior*), treating them as annuals.

SOME STAND UP IN THE WIND

The first consideration when placing pots in a wind-swept area is weight. This is the only time Christina puts anything in a container besides soil mix. “When a pot needs to be heavy—it’s very tall, or in high winds—I will add a concrete block or a big rock into the bottom,” Christina says. Then she piles potting mix on top of that.

However, she’s aware that water can build up at the point where the potting mix touches the rock below. This is a condition farmers call *perched water*. Due to capillary action, water hesitates to move from one matrix to another. The soil will stay over-saturated at that place of change even as it dries out on the surface. To counter this, Christina chooses containers that are large enough to allow plenty of room above the rock and saturated soil for healthy roots to form.

Plants for windy spots must have an open structure that won’t act like a sail and send the whole container flying. Christina’s choices include many



CHRISTINA'S DO'S AND DON'TS

DO—

Water twice. With hand watering, Christina has a sure-fire technique. "Water gently and lightly," she says. "Then walk away for 10 minutes, come back and water deeply. This breaks the surface tension of the soil and allows water to penetrate thoroughly."

Soak hanging baskets. Dried out soil mix can lock up like concrete and not allow water to penetrate. Christina says, "This is the sad demise of many a hanging basket." Take down the basket and submerge in a large bucket until bubbles stop forming and the weight is much heavier.

Feed lightly. Christina feeds with a granular organic fertilizer and renews it each time she changes out seasonal containers. Long-term plants get a yearly light fertilizing on the surface.

Mulch pots. Whether it's wood chips or stones, every container Christina tends receives a renewed mulch each year if there is any exposed soil.

Use pot feet. Anything that will elevate the container is good, especially in garden beds where the bottom might become glued to the soil and prevent proper drainage. Christina prefers small hidden rubber pot feet that won't slide. In areas with high winter winds, she removes them seasonally for added stability.

DON'T—

Design for flowers. Christina says, "If you begin your design based on a flower, you will almost always be disappointed. If you base your design on the foliage and the textures first, *then* add the flowers you will never go wrong."

Pile in recyclables. Loading the bottom of a large container with old milk jugs, Styrofoam peanuts, or other objects to reduce weight or amount of soil is counterproductive. "Potting soil is relatively inexpensive," Christina says. "Use it all the way down." You'll get better drainage and avoid root rot.

Add water-holding gels. "Put in too much and they can pop plants right out of the pot at the first watering," Christina notes. Gels also have the annoying habit of moving to the top of the container, often floating through the mulch. Extra gels are not necessary, she says, if you use quality potting mix and good watering methods.

Overdo compost. Out in the garden, compost gets moved into the soil by all the microbiota. Not so in a pot. "Compost needs to be applied lightly to avoid putrefying the soil," Christina says. Save heavier applications for the garden beds.



The foundation of a good container design is foliage. Here Christina has combined 'All Gold' hakone grass (*Hakonechloa macra*), 'Captain Kirk' hosta, and variegated 'Tom West' fuchsia.

non-invasive ornamental grasses such as certain sedges (*Carex* spp.) or fountain grass (*Pennisetum* spp.) and cold-tolerant conifers such as spruce (*Picea* spp.) or assorted pines. She also employs heathers (*Calluna vulgaris*) and sometimes broad-leaf shrubs, such as holly olive (*Osmanthus* spp.) If winds are strong only in the winter, hardy deciduous trees and shrubs are also good candidates.

In addition to all these harsh conditions, Christina notes one more situation that she considers the most challenging.

"That's a container in dry shade with no moisture—like on a front porch or under a deep overhang," she says. Perhaps the pot is not on an automatic watering system, or it needs to be turned off in winter.

In those cases, Christina is not above using a bit of artifice. Recently, she worked on a house for sale. It needed to have a welcoming container on the porch, "But no one would be there to water it," Christina says. So, she planted her old standby, cast-iron plant (*Aspidistra elatior*), which can continue to look

good with a lot of neglect. She added colorful pussy willow twigs and fluffy white-flowered branches made of silk from a craft store. No, it isn't "authentic," as several followers on her social media platform lamented, but it is lively, welcoming, and lovely to behold. ■

Mary-Kate Mackey's latest book, co-authored with Kathleen Brenzel, is *The Healthy Garden—Simple Steps for a Greener World*. She gardens in Eugene, Oregon.