

Spring Container Gardening

Container gardens are the perfect solution for those that need more gardening space and/or for those that do not have traditional yard space to utilize - plus they can add so much color and joy, who could resist? Spring is the perfect time to get your container gardens planted for an exciting season of color. Summer annuals are popping into bloom and the choices are simply endless. Look for bloom, foliage, structure, twig color, interesting shape, etc. - anything that catches your fancy to enjoy for the season. We always follow the same container commandments; pick a “thriller” to use as a centerpiece, some “fillers” to add texture, foliage and color and some “spillers” to accentuate the other plants that you have chosen, as well as soften the edge of the container. You may have somewhat permanent elements in your container already, allowing you to just freshen them up with seasonal color and let the mainstay material shine year after year. This is all about adding flower power to last throughout the growing season until the frost comes in the fall.

Some additional tips for the container garden:

- Use a good organic Potting Soil, like **‘Edna’s Best’ from E.B. Stone Organics**, to ensure optimum nutrition and drainage. Want to maximize growth, especially with edible containers? Use **‘Ultimate Recipe/Recipe 420’ from E.B. Stone Organics** with extra organic goodies for the “ultimate” container. Have old tired potting soil? Replace it with fresh soil and your plant selections will grow much better!
- When you are planting a “permanent” planter (like a Japanese Maple specimen container), consider mixing 1/3 E.B. Stone’s organic ‘Planting Compost’ with 2/3 ‘Edna’s Best’ organic potting soil - or you can just use ‘Raised Bed Mix’ from E.B. Stone that is essentially the same thing. This will help achieve maximum drainage and the compost will add a bit more longevity to the mix. Planting acid-loving plants like conifers or blueberries? Use the **‘Acidic Planting Mix’ from E.B. Stone Organics** to keep them happy long term. Planting succulents or cactus? Utilize the gritty **‘Cactus Mix’ from E.B. Stone Organics**. The point is this, using great soil of the right type will give you happy plants that will thrive.
- Use a good organic fertilizer, like **‘Sure Start’ and/or ‘Rose and Flower Food’ from E.B. Stone Organics**. Mix some in your pot when you plant and then water in well after plants are planted. I would also use some **‘Ultra Bloom’** mixed in the soil as well, for a superior way to keep things blooming strong. It can be reapplied on the surface and watered in every 6 weeks or so to maximize your flower power, or follow the next step below...
- For maintenance and to keep things blooming strong, use a good water soluble fertilizer every 2 to 4 weeks. We recommend **‘Sea Grow’**, an excellent hybrid organic/synthetic fertilizer - the goodness of organic food and the instant gratification of a synthetic. There are two choices of ‘Sea Grow’, **‘Flower & Bloom’ (4-26-26)** and **‘All-Purpose’ (16-16-16)**. Another option is a synthetic time release food like **‘Osmocote’**. This should be mixed in with the soil and will slow feed for up to 4 to 6 months.

- Be sure to look at some **Pot Risers** or pot feet for your containers, especially if you are on a hard surface like concrete or wood. These will make sure the container drains properly and you won't get the circle stains on your entrance landing, driveway, patio or deck! And speaking of drainage... No need for gravel in the bottom as it does not help with drainage like you think it does!
- If you are just planting annuals in deeper pots and don't need to fill the entire container with soil, you can add an **Ups-A-Daisy** spacer in the pot that creates a platform inside the container, setting the soil level much higher. If you desire a longer life out of the plants and want to leave them in for a number of years, don't do this. You will need soil all the way to the bottom of the pot to increase the years of happiness of your longer term specimens.
- Pay attention to sun and shade requirements. Shade plants should be grouped together and sun plants grouped together - plants for part sun/part shade can be used with either. Full sun is considered 6+ hours, so if you have sun shining directly on your plants for half of the day, they are in a full sun location. Part sun or part shade is generally between 3 and 6 hours of direct sun per day. Anything less than 3 hours and you have a spot for shade-loving plants. There are lots of great choices for all light conditions.
- Look at watering needs. Make sure you select plants that like similar amounts of water so that every one of your container specimens are happy and healthy. Container gardens should be checked daily for water, especially in the hot summers. Try poking your finger into the soil 2" down to feel if it is still moist or dried out. Be careful not to overwater – a soaking wet, over-watered container will crash faster than one with no water at all!
- Pay attention to which flowers need to be deadheaded and which ones are self-deadheading. It is pretty easy to pinch some spent flowers back every week or two and keep the container looking fresh and sharp, as opposed to tired and neglected.
- If you are looking for a permanent planter, pick plants that you can relocate into your garden in a few years so that you can start again! Color can be added to this each season to invigorate the look a couple times a year – now for summer color and then again in the fall for winter interest. The permanent plants can also be root pruned to extend their life in a container. Keep in mind that this is best done in early spring, not during the growing season.
- Select a good frost-proof pot so that you can enjoy the planter and still be able to use it again and again, year after year. You pay for what you get!
- Show off your individual style and select plants that catch your eye. Go bold with tropical foliage and hot colors, or be more subtle with pastels and muted colors. It is up to you and your own taste as a gardener!
- Look at all the new varieties each season. The breeders keep on breeding and there are spectacular new colors available every season. But don't forget about the classic favorites as well, there are always oldies and goodies worth trying. Keep in mind that many

brand/trade names of annuals are out there and no nursery can carry all of these brands and choices. Be flexible and substitute a different brand with the same color and habit, if needed.

- When planting time begins, keep these tips in mind...
 - Always plant starts at the same level in containers – don't bury annuals too deep. Be gentle when you plant them as some will break easily when young!
 - Mix fertilizers in with soil at the base and then add a bit on top when you are done, before watering.
 - Consider adding a thin layer of compost on top when you are done to help conserve water, and it looks a lot better than potting soil.
 - Lightly loosen the roots of plants that are "rootbound" to encourage fresh growth in your container. Sometimes even pulling/cutting the bottom area of matted roots completely off will help as well.
 - Be sure to water in the soil well if it is dry before planting. Otherwise, one good soaking after planting will help settle everything.

Container Design Tips

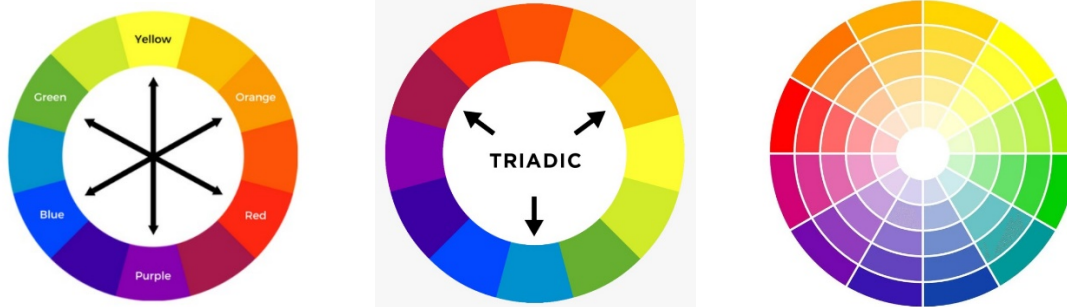
from Sunnyside's container designer Sara

Things to know before shopping for plants:

1. **What size opening does your container have?** This will help you figure out how many and what size plants you can fit in your arrangement.
2. **How tall is your container?** This will help you choose plants with complimentary height. For balance, I often choose plants that, through the season, will grow to the same or 1.5 times the height of the container. I find that a wide, bulky pot offers more visual weight to the bottom of the arrangement and that it can handle a taller centerpiece or something with a wide canopy like many Japanese maples, for example.
3. **How many hours of direct sun will your container receive in a day?**
4. **Consider the colors and textures in the area.** What color is your container? What color is your house, fence, shed, etc? What plant foliage and flower colors are nearby?
5. **How will your container be viewed?** Will you be viewing your container from all sides or will it be backed up to a structure or otherwise viewed from one side?

A couple of basic tips for combining colors:

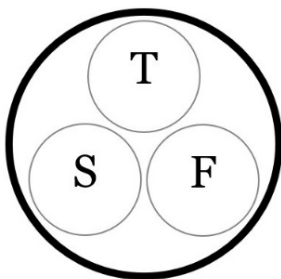
When looking at a color wheel, the colors across from each other are complimentary. These pairings make the colors pop! Whether choosing bright, bold colors or soft pastels, a complimentary color scheme will undoubtedly be beautiful. If you draw a triangle, with equal sides, through the wheel, you will get a pleasing Triadic combination (see diagram below). Don't forget to keep your container color in mind. Many are neutral, but a pot in a bold color can be an asset by giving you a base color to start with that you can then add to with foliage and flower colors. There is a wealth of information available if you would like to dive into color theory. At the end of the day, choose colors that are pleasing to you!



Design Options:

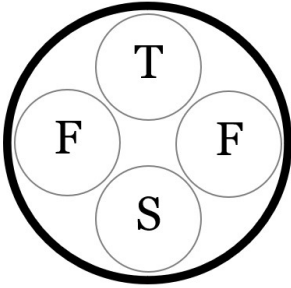
Many people have a pretty good idea of what colors they enjoy, but most struggle when it comes to composition. Below I have put together some “maps” to help when piecing together container arrangements, both one-sided and centered options. Many of the plants in the Seasonal Color department here in the nursery are in 4” and quart size pots. If you have a 14” or 16” container, 7 plants from 4” pots fit nicely. The bigger the container you are planting, the more quart and/or larger-sized plants you can use. When choosing plants, keep in mind that some plants grow more vigorously than others. If all of this feels daunting, we are always happy to help you find plants here in the nursery that play well together.

One-sided Design Options: Here are some design choices if your container will mainly be viewed from one side. These work well for planting a full container of annuals or plants you plan to keep in the container for a single season. The third diagram below is a design combination I create very often - but they're all great!

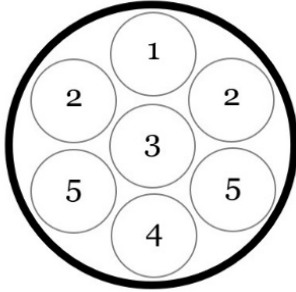


Let's start with a simple design. This includes 3 plants, a “thriller” as your tallest element in the back, a “filler” as the shorter, mounding plant, and a “spiller” as the plant that trails over the edge of your container. This design is wonderful up against a fence or flanking your doorway. Include some larger specimens in a tall pot for boldness and eye-catching drama.

*Created by Sara Christopherson
for Sunnyside Nursery
(v.2022)*

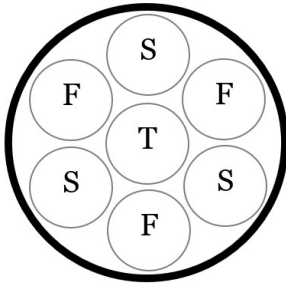


Here is another option with 2 “filler” plants - these can be the same if you like a symmetrical design. Adding variety with 2 different plants in the “filler” spots creates an opportunity for additional color or texture in your combination.

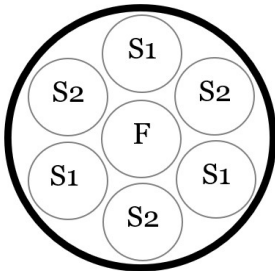


Rather than using the terms thriller, filler and spiller for this one, I find it easier to see it as stair steps. Number 1 in the back is the tallest. Flank your tallest plants with some shorter, but still upright plants (number 2). Number 3 is a mid-sized filler - this plant can be left out in smaller containers. Use a short mounding plant for Number 4 and a couple of trailing plants for the Number 5 spots.

Centered (or multi-directional) Design Options: Continuing on with designs that are visually appealing from all sides, these design options are ideal for containers that you want to look great from every angle.



Now for a centered design that will look lovely from all sides. We have a “thriller” in the center and three “fillers” arranged around it in a triangle. Using 3 of the same plant creates a round, balanced look. Lastly, choose 3 “spillers” to trail out between the “fillers.”



Lastly, I have modified the centered design for use with hanging baskets. We have the same concept with the triangles creating a round arrangement. The difference is that the centerpiece is a “filler” to fill out the center. Choose 3 of one “spiller”, 3 of another and alternate them.

These are just some guidelines I use when planting containers, both for myself at home and for the nursery, but these are not rules. Use the tips that help and inspire your creativity, leave behind those that don't. Ultimately, this is about experimenting, learning, and having fun with beautiful plants!