

OUTDOOR CONTAINERS OFFER GREAT GARDENING OPPORTUNITIES

By Ralph E. Mitchell, *Director/Horticulture Agent of Charlotte County Extension Service*

If you have ever seen a nicely planted container in a deck or patio setting, you can really see and appreciate not only the colorful flowers and foliage, but also the design and features of the container. Gardening in containers brings the plants closer to the viewer and increases the eye appeal and prominence of the planting. Gardening in larger containers is a trend that is gaining in popularity whether using annuals, perennials, tropical plants, or even woody plants.

Large container gardens often combine different types of plants to create a slice of landscape using color, proportion and texture to achieve this goal. Basic to this effort is to place tall plants in the back, (or center of the container) with the shorter plants aligned along the front edge. You may have to decide which is the primary view or front of the container. Choose one specimen plant in the center of the container as the anchor piece. Then plant flowering annuals or perennials around the central plant. As needed, the plants surrounding the central permanent anchor plant can be replaced with new, fresh annuals. A good look can be captured by using one upright plant surrounded by mounding plants. Complete this design by planting along the edge of the container with weeping or trailing plants. Good color mixes would include burgundy/purple-leaved plants with silver-, yellow- or chartreuse-leaved plants. Mixes of yellow flowers with red and orange flowers also offer eye-catching color.

If you choose a single plant to give a classic look, try a large succulent, palm, cycad or even an ornamental grass or a bamboo specimen. While this type of container garden gives a simple elegance, you have to make sure that the specimen plant selected is superior in appearance.

Use the largest containers that you can obtain. Consider including small trellises, various supports or some type of decorative objects to

add interest. Grouping multiple containers can also make a nice display. For best appearances, group containers of similar shape, (just different sizes) or of similar color. The container you use may be made of concrete, glazed pottery or fiberglass. Whatever you select, proper drainage is the most important feature. Holes may need to be drilled to provide this essential aspect. Keep in mind that shallow containers tend to limit root depth and subsequently require more frequent watering.



This simple design uses a mix of tall plants placed in the back and short plants positioned along the front edge of the container.

Use a potting soil that is essentially called a "soil-less soil" which is usually a combination of sterilized peat moss, perlite and/or compost. This type of potting soil tends to be relatively lightweight, yet allows for good water retention. Keep the mix 1-2 inches below the rim so that watering can be accommodated. One great feature of container gardens is their

portable nature that allows you to move them around based on the season or decorative needs. However, as large containers can be heavy and difficult to move, consider using plant stands with casters or containers with built-in castors to allow for easier moving. Also, consider using a saucer under the container to catch excess drainage water. This will keep things neater and prevent a slippery puddle.

Large containers may require up to three waterings a week during hot weather. Because of frequent watering, fertilizer will tend to leach out quickly. A slow-release fertilizer will work best to provide a steady supply of nutrients.

To keep your container gardens looking good, groom the individual plants often by removing dead flower heads and leaves to keep the whole unit looking good. You may even have to rotate containers from time to time as older planters are rejuvenated and fresh, showy ones take their place on display. Whether you choose to garden in large containers for their beauty and design, their mobility or their adaptability to small spaces, this aspect of horticulture will fit into all of your landscapes outdoor spaces.

For more information on all types of gardening ideas, please contact our Master Gardeners on the Plant Lifeline at 941.764.4340 from 1:00pm-4:00pm Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Our office is located at 25550 Harbor View Road, Suite 3, in Port Charlotte. Our Plant Clinics are available across the county:

- **Demonstration Garden (6900 Florida Street, PG)** Thursdays 9:00am-11:00am.
- **Englewood/Charlotte Public Library** Thursdays 10:00am-1:00pm.
- **Mid-County Regional Library** 1st and 3rd Thursday of month 1:00pm-3:00pm.
- **Edison College Learning Resources Library** 3rd Tuesday of month 1:00pm-4:00pm.
- **South Gulf Cove Learning Garden** 3rd Wednesday of month 9:00am-12:00pm.

Monthly Plant Clinics are Saturdays 9:00am-12:00pm at the following locations:

- **Peachland Promenades Publix** 2nd Saturday of month.
- **Home Depot Murdock & Home Depot Punta Gorda** 3rd Saturday of month.
- **Lowe's Garden Center Murdock** 4th Saturday of month.

Ralph Mitchell is the County Extension Director/Horticulture Agent for the Charlotte County Cooperative Extension Service. You may contact him by email (Ralph.Mitchell@charlottefl.com). You may also contact a volunteer Master Gardener 1:00pm-4:00pm Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 941.764.4340 or by email (Master.Gardener@charlottefl.com).

For more information about our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program, please contact our FYN Horticulture Program Assistant, Allison Steele, at 941.764.4340. Allison can help educate you about the Florida Yards & Neighborhoods Program so that you can create a beautiful, Florida-Friendly landscape that saves you time and money while conserving precious water resources and reducing pollution.

Resource:

Knox, G.W. (2008) Container Gardens for Outdoor Spaces. UF/IFAS Extension Service.