

# CONTAINERS IN THE GARDEN

How to arrange your plants in pots and your pots in the garden. Fergus Garrett



Assemble your containers as you would design a border: start with lasting foliage plants for structure, then add flowering (and fragrant) plants. When plants fade, replace them with new and different faces.



**Pots add the finishing touches to a garden**, providing accents that are highly portable and endlessly changeable. The number of plants lending themselves to pot culture is countless, and there are numerous ways in which they can be used. Indoors, plants in containers bridge the gap between the house and the garden, brightening our quarters throughout

the year. Treasures can be brought in, either as permanent fixtures or as ephemerals tricked into performing out of season and thereby giving us scents and colors when our senses are most starved. Outdoors, they can soften terraces and courtyards with their billowing contents, or add firmness and structure to more informal, wishy-washy areas. Where planting space is limited, such as on rooftops and balconies, containers are invaluable.

Pots allow plants to be grown individually without competition, enabling you to succeed with delicate and demanding specimens, and grow others to a perfection they never achieve in the border. Having complete control of the soil, water, and nutrients, you can grow deciduous azaleas on your alkaline site, *Eryngium maritimum* on heavy clay, or a water lily on your terrace.

Don't forget, however, that only a thin wall separates the roots of a potted plant from the outside, and without the buffering of surrounding soil, the roots quickly feel the effects of extreme temperatures and over- or underwatering. You must protect your plant and provide for it. Plants in pots need good soil with plenty of nutrients to start and constant feeding throughout the season. I mix a little slow-release fertilizer such as Osmacote into the potting mix before planting. Once the plants are growing strongly I feed them with a liquid fertilizer as frequently as is recommended. These plants are working hard and need plenty of sustenance. They also require regular watering—often daily in high summer—and good drainage. (Keep drainage holes open with crocks laid in the bottom of the pot before you add any soil.)

**You cannot overlook the light needs of plants in pots.** No matter how well grown, a sun-lover will languish if put in a shady spot, and those that like it cooler will frazzle in direct sun. Wind is another important factor to keep in mind. Even modest winds can tear delicate foliage and break lush stems, so seek sheltered areas for potted specimens. If your garden receives lots of

wind, grow plants with small, leathery leaves and consider anchoring your pots.

**A well-made pot with simple lines is an object of great beauty.** Not only does it frame plants, but it also provides the focal point for them to be noticed. Choosing the right size and shape of container is vital to a flourishing plant—too big and the plant is visually swallowed up, looking foolishly out of scale; too small and its roots run out of space prematurely. *Geranium maderense*, for example, needs three gallons of root space (or intensive feeding) in order to produce its dramatic flowers; give it one gallon and it won't perform. The determining factors are the ultimate size of the plant and its vigor.

**A sensible shape is also an important consideration in selecting a pot.** Flat sides make the job of knocking a plant out of a pot much easier than it is with a bulbous-shaped container. Avoid pots that have too narrow a base—they're inclined to topple over. They can be propped up by other pots in a group, but on their own without support are as good as useless. Small bulbs such as *Iris reticulata* and *I. histrioides* look best in shallow pans not more than four and a half inches high. Large tulips need more root space, so a pot with a nine-inch depth but still pan-shaped is ideal, whereas lilies look best in a container that is narrower though still nine inches deep. A standard 10-inch (in diameter) pot is best for three large lily bulbs, or five if they are small.

**Pot displays for the house can run right through the year.** These include plants that are long-term fixtures such as the tender fern *Polypodium aureum* or *Begonia haageana*, which looks regal on the dining room windowsill. These and others like them benefit from a summer outing in a semishaded spot, but must come back inside as soon as temperature begins to cool. The house also benefits from plants like hyacinths and sweet-smelling 'Paperwhite' daffodils that are brought in as they come into flower. Both are planted into their

If a perfectly **flat pot** is to sit on an equally flat surface, place small pebbles or some other pot "feet" under the pot to ensure good drainage.

To tell if a pot needs **watering**, hit the side of the pot sharply. If it goes "plunk," it needs water; if it goes "plink," it doesn't. Check daily in high summer.

**When fertilizing pots, use half the recommended strength at twice the frequency.**

containers in October and stashed in a cold frame or cold bulkhead for a couple of months. The daffodils we force at Dixter are for Christmas and have to be watched carefully, as they are apt to come on too quickly; if they do, we hold them back by moving them to a cooler place. The hyacinths go into a warm cellar as well as a heated greenhouse and come on at different times. Crocuses treated the same way in shallow pans open with great gusto as they are brought into a warm room. By night they are placed outside in the front porch to rest before performing again the next day.

A great beauty for indoor display in summer is the chimney bellflower, *Campanula pyramidalis*, with blue or white flowers in spikes rising to six feet. Treat it as a

individuals come and go during the season, and some, such as *Agave americana* 'Variegata', *Pseudopanax lessonii* 'Gold Splash', *Fatsia japonica*, and *Cotyledon orbiculata*, are long-term features, often keeping their place from April to October. These strong foliage plants anchor the group. More fleeting features are arranged around them. These include spring bulbs such as hyacinths, tulips, and daffodils; summer-flowering annuals such as salpiglossis and China asters; and climbers like the spring-blooming *Tropaeolum tricolorum*, *Rhodochiton atrosanguineus*, and *Mina lobata*. You can have lilies for the summer, and begonias and coleus for midsummer to autumn. The plants in these groups may intermingle, but it is a mistake to cram the

The plants within your groupings of containers may intermingle, but it is a mistake to cram the pots too closely together. Leave enough space for the plants to show themselves off.

biennial. Seed sown in April, grown on in a nursery area, and then wintered over in a cold frame will produce large plants flowering out of 12-inch pots in August of the following year. Bring them into the house as the first buds open, and they will flower for weeks, whereas outside bees pollinate the flowers, and the display will last only a few days. Other biennial campanulas such as *C. incurva* and *C. medium* can be treated the same way, as can the perennial *C. poscharskyana* 'Stella', trailing its purple, star-shaped flowers over the edge of the container onto a table. Once the blooms of the annual and biennial campanulas have faded, toss them on the compost heap.

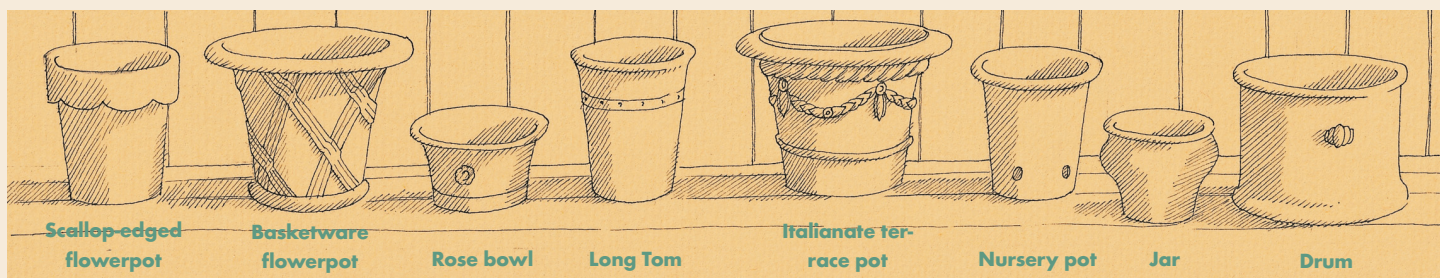
The outdoor displays include pots herded together to create a single picture and pots on their own, sometimes containing just one plant, other times stuffed with an assortment. In the case of clusters of pots, some of the

pots too closely together. Leave enough space for the plants to show themselves off.

Arranging pot groupings involves the same design principles you use for the border. First of all, consider whether the plant will be happy in its position. Second, ask yourself whether it will look good with its neighbor. Have you got enough boldness and structure? Is there a strong element of contrast? Good shapes are all important.

Start off by choosing a principal plant and building from that. For example, you might choose *Canna indica* 'Purpurea', with its bold, paddle-shaped leaves. It has a long season and is happy in a pot. As a contrast to the canna in color and in texture, you could use *Cosmos* 'Purity', with its fresh, ferny green leaves and white flowers. Next add the orange-flowered dahlia 'David Howard', which, although similar to the canna in col-

Match the shape and size of your pot to the needs and habit of your plant. Bulbous pots look nice but can be hard to clean.

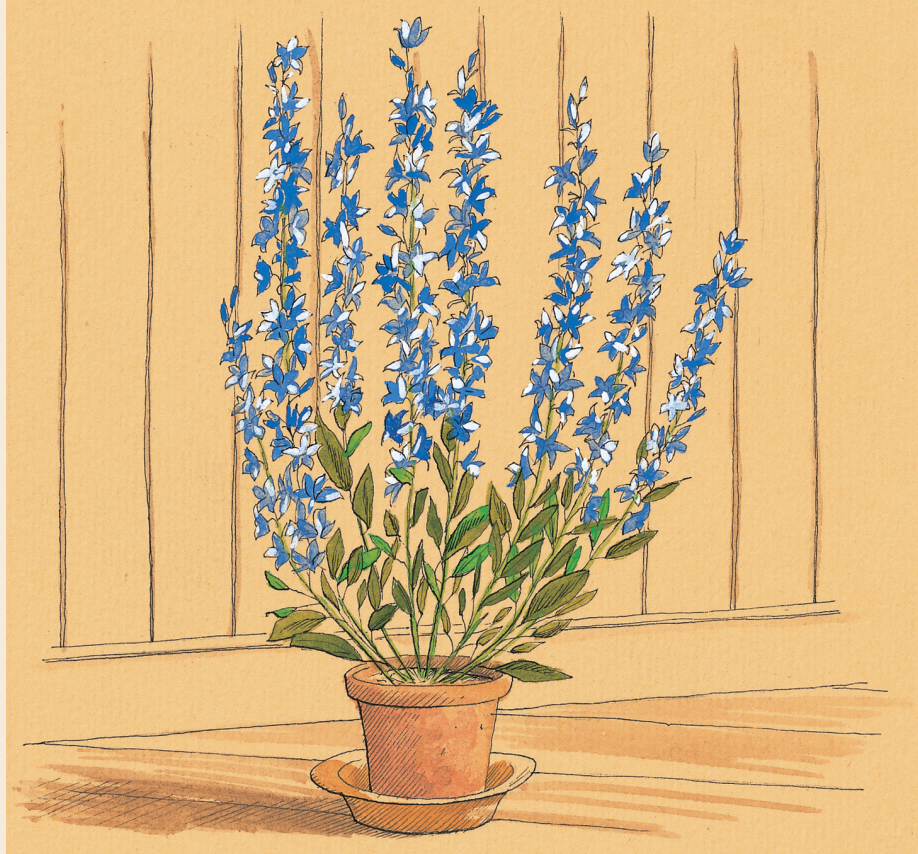




oring, is quite different in shape. *Pseudopanax lessonii* 'Gold Splash', with its mottled palmate leaves and distinct structure, might come next, followed by *Setaria palmifolia*, a grass with arching, corrugated, green, strap-shaped leaves totally different from the others. The magenta-flowered *Cosmos bipinnatus* 'Dazzler' separates the setaria and *Agave americana* 'Variegata', as these two are similar in shape, with the brown-leaved sedge *Carex buchamanii* at the front. Add the trailing *Petunia* 'Purple Wave', a *Bidens ferrulifolia* with a bold pot of the silver-leaved succulent *Cotyledon orbiculata*, and there's your combination. Other plants can come in and out of this group throughout the season. Having a back-up area to hold pots is essential, as only the best should be used. Groups like these become an important part of the garden scene, and should be placed in important locations such as on either side of an entrance porch, or on a terrace.

**Mixing plants in one container requires that careful consideration be given to the needs and habits of the ingredients.** Not only do they have to look good together, they also need to be able to cope with the same soil conditions. A trailing blue *Convolvulus sabatius* mixes well with the gray-leaved *Helichrysum microphyllum*, both being of similar vigor. Combine them with a compact tibouchina to give height and strength, add the dainty *Begonia fuchsioides* for a different texture, and the pendulous, red-flowering, *Begonia* 'Dragon Wings' to provide contrast in shape, texture, and color, and you've got a happy mixture for months on end.

Get the vigor wrong, however, and the stronger ele-



ment dominates. For instance, put *Helichrysum petiolare* side by side with *Petunia* 'Purple Wave' and the weaker petunia is quickly overwhelmed by the helichrysum. A ratio of four petunias to one helichrysum shifts the balance sufficiently to give you an appealing mix.

These pot mixtures can be used in groups working together with other pots or, if bold enough, can be placed on their own to act as accent points. They will extend your season and give pleasure for months on end. ♡

***Campanula pyramidalis* makes a striking six-foot plant (more or less upright depending on your staking) whose flowers will last for weeks indoors.**

## Potting Mixes

**Two recommended, widely available potting mixes are:**

**Peter's Professional, Sun-Gro**

**Alternatively, you can prepare your own potting mix. The following formulas are suggested for growing foliage plants:**

- Two parts peat, one part perlite, one part coarse sand.
- Two parts peat, one part coarse sand.
- One part peat, one part coarse sand, one

part finely ground pine bark.

- One part peat, one part finely ground pine bark, one part perlite.

**Or try this mix, which was developed at Cornell University for commercial growers but is easily adapted**

**to home use. This recipe will make a bushel. Cornell foliage plant mix:**

- $\frac{1}{2}$  bushel sphagnum peat moss
- $\frac{1}{4}$  bushel vermiculite, no. 2
- $\frac{1}{4}$  bushel perlite (medium fine)

- 8 tbsp. ground dolomitic lime
- 2 tbsp. superphosphate (20% powdered)
- 3 tbsp. 10-10-10 fertilizer
- 1 tbsp. iron sulfate
- 1 tbsp. potassium nitrate

**This foliage plant mix is well suited to ferns, begonias, cistus, coleus, ficus, marantas, pelargoniums, pileas, and sansevierias.**