

CONTAINER GARDEN DESIGN BASICS



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Container Garden Design Basics

Working with quick color destined for containers can be one of gardening's most enjoyable tasks. By applying the principles of color blending and mixing leaf textures and plant shapes, you can follow one simple recipe to create winning combinations. Three ingredients are all it takes to plant one gorgeous [pot](#) after another -- it's as easy as one, two, three.

Successful plantings will pull the eye to the center to a “thriller” plant. Plants that work well in this role have compact, upright growth such as salvia, grasses and Dracaena spike. Around the thriller, you want to create a sense of flow, so complementary “fillers” should be used. Filler plants will have a compact, upright growth. Good examples of filler plants are geraniums, dusty miller and heliotrope. To get a lush, overflowing look, add additional plants that will serve as the “spiller”, plants like sweet potato vine, verbena, vinca vines or portulaca.

One: Thriller



The first ingredient is an attention-grabbing plant, also called a thriller. This plant takes center stage in a container, serving as the star of the design production. All other [plants](#) relate to this player in some way.

Usually the thriller plant features an in-your-face shape with a strong upright growth habit. Thrillers typically unleash flower power by blooming nonstop all season, or they unfurl dramatic leaves. In containers viewed from all sides, place a thriller in the center. In containers placed against a wall, position it in the back.

Two: Filler

The second ingredient, known as the filler, complements the thriller, but it never steals the spotlight. These supporting players typically have rounded mound or misty shapes.

Fillers accomplish several tasks. They complement the thriller with leaf or flower color, texture, or other special characteristics. They help disguise the thriller's base and add colorful substance in the space between soil and thriller. Aim for fillers that grow to one-third to two-thirds the height of the thriller.

Place fillers around the thriller between it and the pot rim. For a pot that looks instantly full, use three fillers in a 14-inch pot. If you're willing to let plants slowly fill in, you can plant just two fillers: one in front and one in back, or, if they are in pots that will be in a corner or against a wall, one on each side of the thriller.

Three: Spiller

The third ingredient is a plant that trails over the edge of the container and helps tie it to its surroundings. It's called a spiller plant. When you're looking for a spiller, seek a plant with a sprawling shape. Leaf or flower color should contrast or echo that of the thriller and/or filler.

Plant spillers along pot edges in the openings left between filler plants. It might be a tight squeeze, but feel free to shove and shoehorn plants into place. Anticipate using two spillers for a 14-inch pot viewed from one side, or two or three spillers for a container viewed from all sides.

Other Keys to Success

Get inspired. Look for container ideas in plant catalogs or garden magazines. Choose colors that match your outdoor furnishings or your home's exterior. Or simply find a plant you like, and build a custom design around it.

Test it out. Give your design a dry run at the garden center. Arrange plants in your cart the way they'll appear in the container. Change as needed. Scale is relative. A plant used as a filler in one pot might make a nice thriller for a smaller pot. Typically, a thriller should not be taller than two times the height of the container.

Think texture. Mix leaf and flower textures in your container gardens to create the most beautiful designs.

Favorite Combinations

Find inspiration for your container designs in these classic combos. You don't need to exactly duplicate what's shown. If you like the [color scheme](#), feel free to use different plants to produce that look. Be creative and adaptive, selecting plants that inspire you.

Sun Container



Black-eyed Susan serves as a thriller, Dragon Wing begonia and 'Buddy' Gomphrena as fillers, and silver thyme as spiller.

Shade Container



Pink-and-green caladium is the thriller, Infinity Pink Frost New Guinea impatiens is the filler, and variegated ivy is the spiller.

Tropical Container



Elephant's ear towers as the thriller over orange impatiens, which act as both filler and spiller in this

Foliage Container



A low thriller, deer tongue fern, is surrounded by 'Dark Heart' coleus and *Alternanthera* serving as fillers and spillers.

Our Top 10 Container Gardening Tips

Container gardening is a fun and satisfying method for growing your favorite [plants](#). Here are 10 simple container-gardening tips to get you off to a strong start.

1. Select a Pot



Most [plants](#) aren't fussy about the type of pot they grow in. All they want is enough space to spread their roots and a few good drainage holes to allow excess water to drain. Pots come in a variety of materials, such as terra-cotta, ceramic, wood, and plastic. All of them work equally well, although terra-cotta pots have a tendency to dry out faster than plastic or ceramic, so you'll need to water them more often. If you buy a new terra-cotta pot, soak it in a pail of water for a day or two to hydrate it before filling with soil. Some plastic pots might need drainage holes drilled in the bottom. Holes should be at least 1/2 inch wide; smaller holes might clog with soil and prevent the water from draining.

2. Choose the Right Soil

Fill your containers with a quality commercial potting soil. Commercial potting mixes are ideal for container gardening because they allow for adequate drainage and aeration. Quality potting soil should include generous helpings of some of the following amendments: peat moss, compost, perlite, vermiculite, and/or rotted manure.

3. Pick Healthy Plants

You can grow almost anything you want in a container -- even trees and shrubs will thrive in a large enough pot. Most people prefer to grow flowers, vegetables, or herbs for their patio, porch, deck, or terrace. Enjoy an edible banquet by mixing a few of each type in the same pot. Strawberries and lettuce, for example, taste as good as they look and make great companions for sun-loving annual and perennial flowers.

4. Match Light Conditions

When selecting plants, read the plant tags before you buy so you know whether they grow best in sun or shade. You don't want to mix sun- and shade-loving flowers in the same pot. Top annuals for sun include petunias, geraniums, calibrachoa, and verbena. Some good annuals for shade include begonia, caladium, impatiens, and *Torenia*. All vegetables and herbs need full sun.

5. Plant in Layers

For a gorgeous layered look, be sure to include a tall, showy plant (thriller), a bushy medium-size plant (filler), and a trailing blooming plant (spiller) in your containers.

Container-Gardening Tip: Select varieties that complement each other in color and leaf form, too. There are many plants that are more prized for their gorgeous foliage than they are for their flowers.

6. Fertilize Regularly

To keep flowers and vegetables in top form all summer, you'll need to fertilize them. Some potting soils have slow-release fertilizer already mixed in, but it's still a good idea to fertilize every two to three weeks. Flowers and vegetables are heavy feeders and will thrive with an extra dose of plant food.

Most commercial fertilizers contain the "big three" nutrients, nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. These are the primary nutrients required for plant growth.

7. Water Frequently

Container plants require more frequent watering than those growing directly in the garden. Water whenever the soil surface feels dry to the touch. During hot, sunny periods you'll probably have to irrigate every day. This is

especially important for hanging baskets that dry out faster because they are buffeted by the wind. You can use a watering can, garden hose, or install a drip irrigation system with a timer that waters your plants automatically every day.

8. Remove Faded Blooms

Annual and perennial flowers will look better when their old, faded blooms are removed. This process, called "deadheading," will encourage a whole new crop of flowers to form. On larger species, such as geraniums, simply clip away the dead flower heads with your fingers or pruning shears. For annuals with tiny flowers, such as sweet alyssum, shear back the entire plant by about 1/3 with scissors or lawn clippers.

9. Renew and Replace

Even with excellent care, some annuals and perennials will begin to look tired by late summer. Instead of trying to revive them, carefully remove the plants from the pot and pop in one or two replacements to give your container a second life. Most garden centers offer replacement annuals in mid to late summer.

10. Clean Up Before Winter

A hard frost marks the end of the gardening season across much of the country. Once your annuals and vegetables have died, toss them on your compost pile and empty your containers. Ceramic and terra-cotta pots can crack if left outdoors over the winter with soil in them. If you want to save any perennials or roses you have growing in containers, plant them directly in the garden now.



You may not have the space or patience to become a master gardener, but anyone can master container gardening. It's a cinch—all you need is a container (a planter in true gardener speak), potting soil, some plants and you're ready to go. Thinking of container gardening like this, it's easy to see why container gardening ideas can be endless—so endless that you may need a few container garden ideas to point you and your pots in the right direction. From [fall container gardening](#) to [hanging container gardening](#) and even [indoor container gardening](#) you'll be inspired to dirty your hands and spruce up your porch or patio with some pretty container gardens in no time.

More Shrubs to Love

Mix any of these shrubs into existing pots.

'Obsession' Nandina offers brilliant red new foliage on an upright plant. Grow in sun or part shade. Try it as a thriller.

'Soft Caress' Mahonia is a winner! Named Plant of the Year 2013 at the Chelsea Flower Show, it likes part sun or shade. With soft, fernlike foliage, it makes an ideal filler.

'Emerald Snow' Loropetalum has white flowers in spring and sporadically in summer and fall. It takes full sun to part shade and is great as a filler, growing up to 3 Sfeet tall.

Combine the season's hottest hues in a vibrant mix of annuals, perennials, and shrubs.

*Information in this presentation is from different sources, to include Southern Living and Landscaping books.

