

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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My introduction to spectacular winter container gardens came during a trip to Dublin several years ago. Generally, Dublin's homes and hotels have no front garden space but are located at the pavement. To create an attractive aspect, Dubliners feature window boxes, and a wide variety of containers located on porches, steps and at doorways. The arrangement of evergreen plants situated in these containers was dazzling even in the somewhat dreary weather. The window boxes and containers introduced texture, color and excitement to nearly every building on nearly every street.

Winters in the Dublin area are very similar to our winters here in the Pacific Northwest: cool, overcast skies and fairly frequent rain and drizzle. Plants that lend themselves to container gardening and that thrive in the cold weather are readily available at our local nurseries and creating miniature gardens for winter interest is enjoyable at this time of year when there are fewer other gardening chores.

To begin, select containers that will hold up to winter. Plastic, wood, terra cotta and glazed ceramic, designed for outdoor use, are all fine. Buy plenty of good quality potting soil. Then think about the space you want to turn into a miniature garden before you go to select your plants. Here are some questions to ask yourself before you go to a nursery:

- How many plants will I need?
- What type of plants do I like (grasses, pines, arbor vitae, hebes, heathers or all of these)?
- How many tall ones, how many short ones?
- Can I use these plants in my garden when they eventually outgrow the container?

Assembling a variety of plants in an empty pot is a good way to choose which ones go together. You can do this right at the nursery and then only buy the ones that "work" with each other. Here are just a few non-flowering plants that will delight the eye all winter: Ornamental grasses: Carex "Ice Dance" (green and white stripes), Helictotrichon sempervirens "Blue Oat Grass" (very blue); Heather: Ericca carnea (winter blooms); Euphorbia, any and all (just choose the colors from bronze to icy white); Taxus baccata "Rapandens" or Taxus cuspidata "Emerald Spreader"; Euonymus fortunei "Gaiety" (green and white that goes to pink in winter); or "Emerald and Gold" (goes to red in winter); Cryptomeria "Spiraliter" (twisted, dark green), or Cryptomeria "Tansii" (tiny, dwarf); Chamaecyparis obtusa Hinoki: Cham. O. "Nana Lutea" (irregular and twisted); "Rigid" (dark green and dense); or "Rainbow" (tiny, yellow cast); Arborvitae "Teddy" or Berckman's "Gold". Flowering plants include the hellebore "Ivory Prince" which is compact and pansies ("Universal" for best winter flowering) and any of the many wonderful primroses available. Inquire at a local WSU Master Gardener Clinic or at one of the many reliable nurseries for more information about specific plants.

When you get home with your selection, make sure they are well watered and then prepare the containers by half filling them with potting soil. Do not cover the drainage holes with anything other than potting soil. Dampen the soil if it is dry as dry soil may damage tender roots. Decide where plants will be placed in the pot and in relation to one another. Start with the one that has the largest root ball. Remove it from the temporary pot, loosen its roots (with your fingers or a knife) and trim any that are too long or too large for the pot. Trimming the roots will not hurt the plant. Set it in the container and do this for each successive plant until you reach the arrangement that you find most pleasing. Then add soil around each plant so that soil

is about a half inch from the top of the pot. Drench with a medium spray of water until it runs out of the drainage hole and set aside. If soil has settled to below original line, add more soil and drench again. When excess water has drained away, set container in final location. Water regularly and every 4 to 6 weeks water with a solution of soluble fertilizer mixed according to manufacturer's directions. And, you can always sneak in a few crocus or snowdrop bulbs, for a jump start on spring.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.

