

Fun With Containers

They can be large or small, formal or funky, classic or modern. With creativity and imagination anything that holds stuff can be modified to grow plants. Containers can provide alternatives to poor soil, lack of sun, limited space, and even hide an ugly view. As with a wardrobe, the plantings can be changed with the season, accessorized to compliment a classic, or stand alone. Like furniture, they can be moved around when the arrangement becomes stale. Underperformers can be relegated to the compost pile, relocated or nurtured back to health. Be careful, though, containers can become addictive and they do require care and feeding. If containers are your thing, here is an easy recipe for creating first rate designs.

The concept of "thrillers, fillers, and spillers" was presented by Steve Silk in the June, 2004 issue of Fine Gardening magazine. The thriller can be any specimen plant, small tree, tall grasses, spiky flower or climbing vines. The thriller is the star of the show. Fillers are the supporting cast - plants that compliment your star in color or texture. Spillers will drape over the sides and anchor the design. The following is one composition featured in Fine Gardening's 2007 container challenge. This entry, among others can be viewed at [Fine Gardening's website](#). The winners were published in the June 2008 issue of Fine Gardening.

FINALIST: Brad Meryhew, Seattle, Washington

Red and yellow are perfect partners 'Moonraker' Cape fuchsia is the anchor for this planting in shades of red and yellow. Four different varieties of coleus, all in shades of red and yellow-green, act as fillers, as do the dahlia and petunia, which echo the colors of the Cape fuchsia and coleus. To finish it off, Brad chose deep reddish black 'Blackie' sweet potato vine, which he prefers to other varieties because it isn't quite as overpowering.



Thriller

'Moonraker' Cape fuchsia (*Phygелиus X rectus* 'Moonraker', Z 8-9)

Fillers

'Mocha Mint' coleus (*Solenostemon scutellarioides* 'Mocha Mint', Z 11)

Supertunia® Mini Rose Veined petunia (*Petunia* Supertunia® Mini Rose Veined, annual)

'Aurora Raspberry' coleus (*Solenostemon scutellarioides* 'Aurora Raspberry', Z 11)

'Religious Radish' coleus (*Solenostemon scutellarioides* 'Religious Radish', Z 11)

'Dappled Apple' coleus (*Solenostemon scutellarioides* 'Dappled Apple', Z 11)

'Figaro' dahlia (Dahlia 'Figaro', Z 9–11) 'Mocha Mint', Z 11)

Spillers

'Blackie' sweet potato vine (*Ipomoea batatas* 'Blackie', Z 11)

Photo/Illustration: Courtesy of Brad Meryhew

When selecting plants, keep in mind their cultivation needs and group those with similar requirements together. For example, consider sun versus shade, draught tolerance, mature growth habit, as well as proportion for the chosen pot. Since nursery's often display their sun and shade plants in separate sections, try different combinations. Some flowers can be fleeting so consider leaf shape and texture. Like with a great outfit for that special occasion, mix and match for stunning combinations.

Once plants are chosen, of particular importance in achieving robust lush growth is the potting mix. Ordinary garden soil does not offer enough air, moisture and nutrients for plants confined to containers. The potting medium should hold moisture, yet allow the pot to drain. In other words, the soil must be porous enough to reach the lower roots, while not trapping water in the bottom of the pot and drowning the roots. Specific mixes for containers are readily available at home and garden stores. Here is a recipe, developed many years ago by Cornell University, for a soilless potting mix that replicates those sold in garden centers.

Ingredients

(Note: 1 bushel equals approximately 1 cubic foot or 8 gallons)

- 1 bushel peat moss
- 1 bushel perlite or vermiculite
- 1/2 pound limestone (either dolomitic or calcitic - adds calcium and the dolomite adds some magnesium. Calcitic is readily available as agricultural limestone, the dolomitic is sometimes harder to find).
- 1 pound 5-10-5 fertilizer (available from many manufacturers-Scotts, Lilly Miller, Miracle-Gro – check the label for appropriate N-P-K ratios.)
- 1 1/2 ounces 20% superphosphate fertilizer (available from Bonide or Hi Yield)
- Mix and moisten thoroughly.

To suit a plant's special needs, have on hand extra mineral aggregate (perlite or turkey grit) and organic materials. Aggregate can be used on plants that like their soil on the dry side. Add extra peat moss for plants that prefer constantly moist soils. Anchor top-heavy plants in a mix amended with sand to add weight to the pot. For extra thirsty plants try adding some moisture trapping crystals. When using soilless mixes, add some time released fertilizer and follow up with regular foliar feeding. During the heat of summer, containers will require daily watering. Always water deeply, allowing the water to run through the drainage holes.

For the plant-a-holic, containers offer a way to give in to whims and cravings and experiment without a major investment of time and money. The rules and the bounds of behavior and design can be tested. The possibilities are endless. Check out [Fine Gardening's fun website](#) that will answer many specific container questions and provide many eye-catching ideas.

Happy potting!

References

[Thrillers, Fillers & Spillers](#). Steve Silk. *Fine Gardening*. retrieved 6/6/2008.

[Soil in Containers Should Be a Good Mix](#). Lee Reich. *Fine Gardening*. retrieved 6/6/2008.