

## Winter Containers Foster Winter Contentment

Well-placed containers filled with plants that look good during the winter months are an asset in any garden. Sited so that they can be viewed from key windows, at entrances or along walkways, such containers provide cheer during the season of short days and interminable drizzle. Try to select sites that are not hit directly by winter winds. Moving a container into a position on the north-facing side of a building during bad weather is a good idea, unless the weight of the container might cause back strain. In areas where frost is common, a north-facing site is actually the best place for container plants because the temperature varies less there, freeing the plants from the stress of freeze-and-thaw cycles.



*Nandina domestica* 'Gulf Stream' with a sedum (name unknown) and *Muehlenbeckia complexa* (Wire vine). The sedum and vine are at least semi-deciduous; the nandina is evergreen.



*Nandina domestica* 'Gulf Stream' with a sedum (name unknown) and *Muehlenbeckia complexa* (Wire vine). Strawberry geranium, *Saxifraga stolonifera*, is in bloom. The sedum and vine are at least semi-deciduous; the nandina is evergreen. The strawberry geranium does not die back, but should probably be protected during periods of severe temperatures.

Devote some time to the task of deciding what to plant in winter containers. Start with your own books. You may be surprised to find pages that have never before attracted your attention, like Sunset Western Garden Book's "Plant Selection Guide – Trees and Shrubs for Containers" (pages 124–25 in the 2001 edition). Examine such a list to determine not only what appeals to you, but what is clearly hardy. Plants that will spend the winter in a container should be hardy in zones colder than your own. (Here in Clark County, Washington, we are in Sunset's zone 6 and the USDA's zones 7 or 8.) Read the text for details about plants which interest you.



Back left: Euphorbia and Carex. Front: Heuchera, euphorbia, a young phormium, ground ivy. Back right: *Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Mariesii' with *Glechoma hederacea* (ground ivy).

Many gardening books include valuable lists. As an example, Tracy DiSabato-Aust's *The Well-Designed Mixed Garden* has an extensive appendix (Appendix B) entitled "Plants by Design Characteristics." Under "Red, Purple or Bronze Foliage" there are a number of subheadings, the last one of which is "Year-round Interest; Perennials:"

- *Anthriscus sylvestris* 'Ravenswing'
- *Carex buchananii*
- *Heuchera* 'Chocolate Ruffles'
- *Heuchera* 'Plum Pudding'
- *Heuchera* 'Velvet Night'
- *Heuchera micrantha* var. *diversifolia* 'Palace Purple'
- *Penstemon digitalis* 'Husker Red'
- *Veronica* 'Waterperry Blue'
- *Viola labradorica*

Use lists like the foregoing and the one in *Sunset* as starting points. Jot down some interesting varieties and do further research in your own books, borrowed books and the internet. Visit open gardens and nurseries, asking questions about growth habits, hardiness, and outstanding varieties of plants in which you are interested.

A dwarf evergreen is often chosen to be the centerpiece (or the only plant) in a winter container. In addition to the trees and shrubs in *Sunset Western Garden Book's* list, consider dwarf forms of arborvitae, juniper, hemlock, spruce, false cypress and Siberian cypress. Review our August 2004 article [Miniature and Dwarf Conifers](#).



*Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Mariesii', with *Glechoma hederacea* (ground ivy)

A deciduous plant with distinctive color or form, a variegated yucca, or an ornamental grass might be an alternate choice. As companions for the centerpiece, choose perennials, grasses, trailing vines (like ivy), sempervivums, sedums, bulbs, herbs (like thyme) and winter annuals (like pansies and flowering kale). Hanging basket choices include ajugas, candytuft, dianthus, *Euonymus fortunei*, some grasses and grasslike plants (like black mondo grass), hellebores, ivies, pansies and violas.

Berries add a nice touch ...

*Skimmia japonica reevesiana* is a dwarf evergreen shrub which gets one and one-half to two feet tall and two to three feet wide. It is unusual among skimmias because it is self-fruitful. It sports dull crimson berries. Surround it with some early-blooming white-flowered bulbs. Give it acidic soil and a sunny site in winter and spring, but move it to a shadier site for the rest of the year.

Fragrance is unforgettable ...

*Sarcococca hookerana humilis*, often labeled *Sarcococca humilis*, is an evergreen shade-loving slow-growing subshrub which bears tiny, inconspicuous but very fragrant flowers early in the year – January and February. The hardiest of the sarcococcas (sar–koh–kok–uhs), it is usually no more than eighteen inches in height. The common name is Sweet Box.

Variegation is eye-catching ...



*Osmanthus heterophyllus* 'Goshiki' (*Osmanthus ilicifolius*), holly-leaved osmanthus, cries out for companions that bring out the yellow and rosy-bronze in its leaves. A slow-growing holly-like shrub, osmanthus is hardy in USDA zones 7 to 9, so it might be risky to plant it in a container in a zone 7 or 8 garden. If you feel inclined to gamble on it, and the pot is too heavy to move, you might cover it with something like the "frost blanket" sold by [Territorial Seed Company](#) to protect most plants to the mid-twenties. The polypropylene fabric allows 50% light transmission and should be removed when temperatures return to the above-freezing range.

*Phalaris arundinacea* var. *picta* (Gardener's Garters) is a plant that many gardeners shy away from because they have seen how it "travels," but it is something to keep in mind as you think about arranging plants together in a winter container. Its narrow leaf blades are variegated cream and bright green. It is hardy in USDA zones 4 to 9.

## Containers and planting mixes

When temperatures are at or below freezing, wet terra cotta or concrete pots which are less than one and one-half inches thick may crack. Thicker pots made of terra cotta or concrete are difficult to move around. Therefore, avoid risky materials and choose attractive, lightweight containers that won't crack during cold spells. Choose large containers, as a greater volume of soil offers more insulation to the plants. Line the sides only of the inside of the container with bubble wrap for additional insulation. The bottom fourth of a deep container may be filled with polystyrene peanuts. For a permanent planting it is wise to use a mix of sterile potting soil and sterile topsoil in a two to one ratio, and a fertilizer specially prepared for conifers or deciduous shrubs, if that is what you are planting. A topping of mulch is as good an idea for containerized plants as it is for other plants. Apply water only when temperatures are 40° or above.

Containers that are not too heavy to be moved may look better in some other area of the garden during the summer. Add bulbs or summer annuals to spruce up any container designed with winter in mind.

Send us pictures and a few details about the containers you plant for winter. We'll use what we can in future articles.

## Resources

Brenzel, Kathleen Norris. *Sunset Western Garden Book*. Menlo Park: Sunset Books Inc., 2001.

DiSabato-Aust. *The Well-Designed Mixed Garden*. Portland, Oregon: Timber Press, Inc., 2003.

Hériteau, Jacqueline. *The National Arboretum Book of Outstanding Garden Plants*. New York, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990.

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Lovejoy, Ann. *The Year in Bloom*. Seattle, Washington: Sasquatch Books, 1987.

Stamats, B.B. "Container Gardening – Planting Containers for All-Season Interest". *Fine Gardening Magazine*, #65, January/February 1999, p. 77.

Williams, Robin; Hopes, Mary-Jane; and Robin Templar Williams. *The Complete Book of Patio & Container Gardening*. London, England: Cassell Paperbacks, 2001. (U.S. distributor Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., New York.)