

JUNE'S GARDEN

CONTAINER GARDENING

A visiting gardener called the many containers on my deck filled with colorful annual flowers the razz-ma-tazz, the show-stoppers, of my garden. The perennial beds are also colorful at times, but most perennials only bloom once through a season. Annuals bloom from the time they're large enough to produce flowers and continue to bloom until the first frost in the fall. Container gardening with annuals does take more time and effort as you need to replant new plants each year, but it's well worth the effort to create a colorful palette of plants that bloom throughout the summer.

Through the years of past experience, also information given to me by other gardeners, I've learned a few steps to take for success.

It's best to start with clean containers. If they have been used before, I wash them with a mild solution of about 1/4-cup of bleach to a gallon of water, then rinse thoroughly. This helps to destroy plant disease or critters left from last year's plantings.

Container plants need soil that is porous, well-drained and yet moisture-retentive. I add peat moss and compost to commercial potting soil using my wheelbarrow to mix the combination together. Peat moss helps retain moisture; compost adds organic soil amendment. If you don't have your own compost, commercial compost is available to buy at garden stores. The soil you use needs to be light and fluffy.

I wait until the first of May to plant annuals. If planted too early they can be damaged by frost. Around Mother's Day is the timetable I use.

Annuals are available to buy in packs, 2-4 or 6 plants to a pack. Choose ones that have not grown too tall or leggy. When dividing plants grown in packs, use a sharp knife to separate them instead of pulling the plants apart. A sharp cut straight down and around each one is less damaging to the root system. If your plant comes in single pots and the roots are entwined, gently tease the roots apart before transplanting. This will encourage the roots to reach out into the soil. Before transplanting, water each plant in its original container. This makes them easier to remove and helps cause less shock in transplanting.

I add slow-release fertilizer, which comes in pellet form, to each container. When I finish planting I first water it thoroughly, then again with a mild solution of liquid fertilizer to help settle the roots into the soil.

Fill each container with as many plants as you can. This is easier to do when you have selected young plants. At full growth the containers are more attractive. Most annuals are compatible as to their needs of fertilizers and moisture. In case you're in doubt, check their labels; most labels have full instructions as to their needs.

My deck is on the south side of the house and I water the containers daily, usually in the morning. If it's especially warm or windy, wind will dry out the pots, so I water again in the early evening. I only use liquid fertilizers about every three weeks. Water the plants first before using the liquid fertilizer to prevent plant-burn. I depend more on time-release fertilizers to provide the nutrients.

When selecting the color combinations of flowers you want to use, also give thought to shapes, textures of both flowers and foliage, and the height of mature growth. Mixing different shapes, textures, and heights makes the composition more interesting.

Color combinations can be inspired to use by a single plant. One year a pansy, patent name 'Joker', whose petals were purple and orange, inspired me to add different shades of purple petunias, orange blooms of marigolds, pelargonium (geraniums), nemesia, and nasturtiums. I chose deep blue lobelia and the silver-grey foliage of helichrysum that both cascaded over the edge of the planter. In other containers I used lighter shades of this color combination: lavender flowering Swan River daisies, coral impatiens and tuberose begonias, to name only a few. After you choose what color you want predominantly to use, the search is on.

Last year in a turquoise blue over-washed large ceramic pot 18" tall, 17" across, I planted a cerinthe major Purpurescens. This plant is a hardy annual whose bracts turn ultramarine as the reddish purple drooping flowers emerge. It grows about 2' tall and as wide in a single season. I added a Martha Washington pelargonium whose flowers were burgundy red, a trailing dark pink fuschia whose variegated foliage colors are cream, green, and a touch of burgundy, a bright pink 'Sunscape' daisy, a variegated 'Sun' coleus, dark blue lobelia, lavender flowering bacopia, and pink flowering strawberry plant. Some of these plants lived over, which I'll use again this year. I saved seeds from the cerinthe which I planted and which have sprouted, and this year I'll add either 'Limelight' chartreuse foliage of helichrysum or a sedum called 'Vera Jameson.' This sedum has foliage similar in color to the cerinthe, and dark pink clusters of flowers appear in late summer.

When Lee Estabrook and his wife Mary had Haystack Garden nursery in the 1980's, Lee taught me how to save soil when filling a large container like the turquoise one I described. Fill the bottom of the pot with large pieces of bark such as the kind that can be bought by the sack, or use layered twigs left over from pruning. Annuals only need about 1 1/2 feet of soil for their roots.

Have fun creating your own razz-ma-tazz.

CORRECTION: In last month's column, a misprint: 'Double Delight' is the name of my rose, not 'Double Digit.'

Tracy Erfling N.D.
Naturopathic Physician

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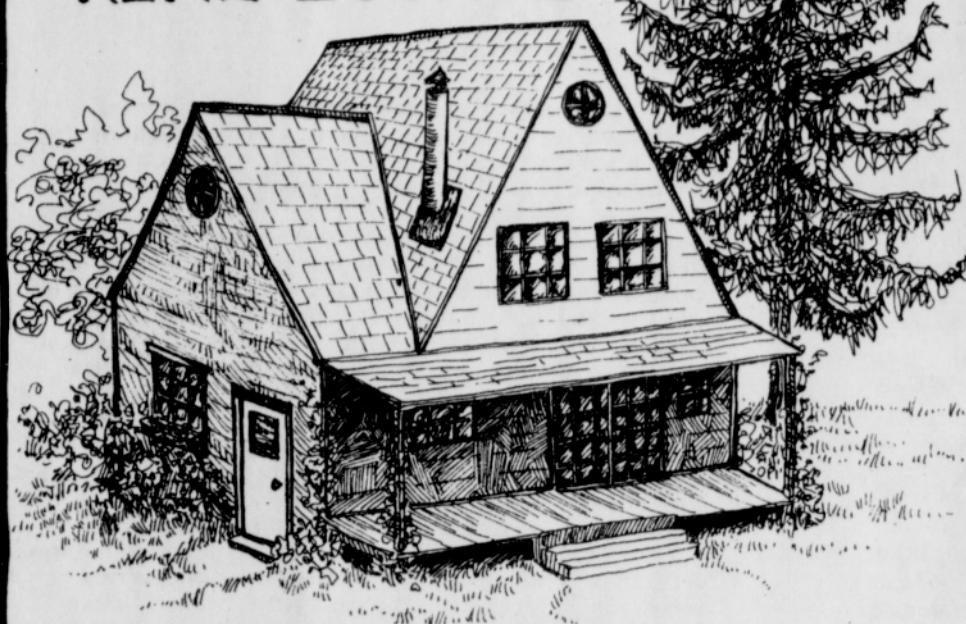
1010 Duane • Astoria, Oregon 97103
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Certified Nutritionist

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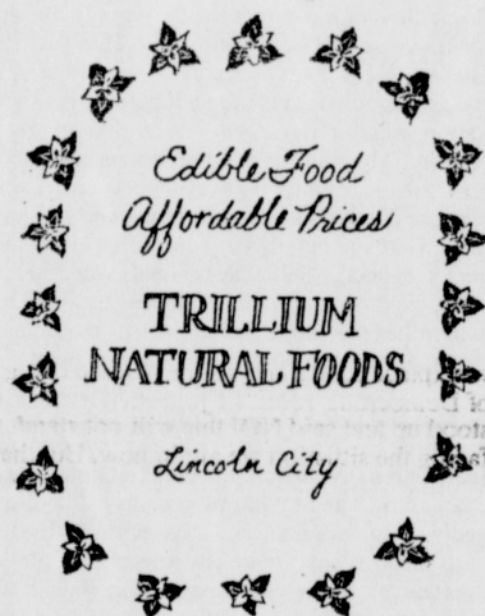
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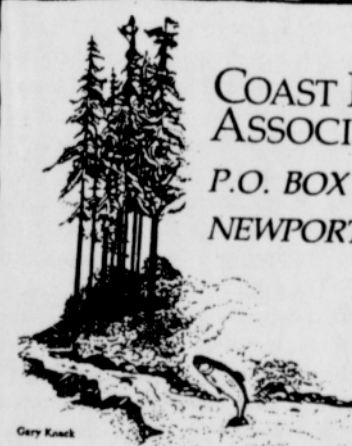


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If someone with multiple personalities threatens to kill himself, is it considered a hostage situation? George Carlin

