

Patio Champs

Choosing and growing plants in pots

This year's unusually cold, slow spring was hard on both gardeners and the plant trade. Now that summer is finally here, it's a joy to see great banks of color in the stores, tempting procrastinating gardeners and reminding us that it's never too late to stuff things in containers.

I love to grow plants in pots, but I don't invest a great deal of time and money in them. I believe the backbone of a pot garden should be dependable, and I expect mine to deliver for three or four months with only basic care. So while I like to try a few new things each year, I mostly rely on favorites that I know I can count on.

Plants that easily over-winter, with or without shelter of some kind, save money and time. Two standouts in the bulb category are lilies and agapanthus (Lily of the Nile). My favorite lilies for containers are the Asiatics. They come in a huge range of colors, subtle or gaudy, and produce spectacular results in early summer, long before the many heat-craving plants reach their full glory.

By the time the petals fall from Asiatic lilies, agapanthus plants are full of buds. My pick for pots is the dwarf variety "Peter Pan." I like the tidy foliage and clear mid-blue flowers. Peter Pan will live for several years without division in a 14-inch pot, small enough to move to the garage with relative ease. (Lilies are as winter-hardy as the pot they grow in, but potted agapanthuses are best moved to a dry, frost-free location.)

Provided they live in frost-resistant containers, hardy shrubs and trees can live outside year-round. Small Japanese maples and hydrangeas live for years without re-potting, if you don't over-fertilize, which makes them a very good investment. Hydrangeas are classic and a great stand-by for shady patios. I prefer to prune them only lightly (in April) so they have many modestly-sized flower heads rather than a few huge mops on straight, cane-like stems.

Roses are almost as easy, provided you match the variety with an appropriate pot size. Small floribundas, polyanthas and the smallest of the modern shrub or landscape roses are particularly good for pots under 20 inches. My current favorite is "Little White Pet." It has grown in the same 16-inch pot for several years, undisturbed except by spring pruning. I remove spent flower clusters during the summer, and it is almost always in flower.

Once they get going, fuchsias bloom incessantly until frost. Many are winter hardy, but my favorite upright fuchsias for containers are the frost-tender "Gartenmeister Bonstedt" and a handful of close relatives, all with tubular flowers. In "Gartenmeister" the flowers are orange-red, and contrast with the dark leaves beautifully. Fuchsias bring hummingbirds to the deck and patio. Most upright types



Japanese forest grass

like at least partial sun.

Certain grasses and sedges look striking in pots. Carex flagellifera is fun in the sun, pouring down from a tall container. Japanese forest grass (Hakonechloa macra) — green or gold, with or without stripes — is hard to beat for shade. (It is, alas, deciduous.) Like most grasses, it looks best on its own. Plant three together for a good immediate effect or use a new one in a mixed pot, then move it up to its own pot next year.

Coleus is an old stand-by that has made a comeback in lots of nice new shades. It is useful in cooler Eugene gardens where many colorful leafy tropicals don't perform well. But don't try to plant it before the weather warms! Coleus enjoys light or partial shade, and chartreuse varieties really light up a shady pot garden. Use it for contrast with grasses and hostas. (It's a lot easier to keep slugs and snails off your hostas if you grow them in pots.)

A spiky silver thing from New Zealand named astelia was an impulse buy. When I failed to find a place for it in the garden, I put it in a pot on the deck. It over-wintered under the eaves next to the front door, where it has remained for more than two years, spurned by deer and proving to be amazingly shade tolerant. It will also grow in sun, but is more silvery and beautiful in shade. Astelia isn't easy to find, but I saw some recently at Dancing Oaks Nursery near Monmouth, OR (503-838-6058).

Some miscellaneous items: Diascia and Swan River daisy (brachycome) are wonderfully sturdy pot fillers and spillers that won't poop out the minute you fall behind with the watering. Neither will coral bells (heuchera) with their colorful and beautifully marked leaves. And while most sages demand full sun to bloom well, the annual salvia "Lady in Red" prefers light or partial shade. It is also one of the few annuals I know that deer don't usually eat. It must be the stinky leaves. **EW**

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