



Color in Pots

Brightly colored blossoms of annuals and perennials add spice to the landscape. According to Marjorie Mason Hogue, growing plants in containers is called “potscaping”, a variation of landscaping. The wonderful idea behind potscaping is the ease of moving colors and textures around the space. Perhaps the space is small, and then color can be added without sacrificing trees and shrubs. There need not be masses of flowers to create pleasing scenery. One clear advantage is instant landscaping without digging. .

Think of the flower colors as an artist’s palette. What would compliment the house? How do the colors go together? What are your favorite plants? Do you want fragrance as well as color? Visit a garden center before deciding on any scheme. Carry pots or trays around the showroom to see what appeals to you. Take a list of plants with their various attributes with you and check each for ease of care, coordinating colors, how the plant interfaces with each other, etc.

In an 8-inch pot, several kinds of plants can grow together. For instance, blue Lobelia to trail around the edge, white Pansies in the next ring, and a tall Marigold in the center. Sweet Alyssum around the edges, Pinks in the next circle, and a purple Stock in the center makes a pretty picture. These three plants are fragrant. In a larger pot, trail Ivy around the sides, red Cockscomb in the middle and something white in the center. Perhaps the picture is coming clearer to you now, with these suggestions.

After you decide what plants you find interesting, but before buying anything, find the pots for the plants. Once you find the pots, here is an easy way to plant. In a 12-inch pot, place a plastic bag of potting soil with holes cut in the bottom. Cut slits in the top and plant! For larger pots, use a larger bag of soil. However most folks want to mix their own soil. Use 1/3 compost, 1/3 desert soil or potting soil and 1/3 perlite or vermiculate. Mix thoroughly, moisten slightly and fill the pots. Remember a “pot” can be an old shoe, a bushel basket, large cement blocks, or a wooden tub, as well as regular containers. Also think of the color of the pot to harmonize with the plants in it. The few necessities are holes in the bottom for drainage; no metal—too hot in our summer, it cooks the roots---and some kind of feet, so the pot bottom does not sit flat. Air needs to circulate for the health of the plant. To keep soil from leaking out the drain holes, Pippa Greenwood suggests placing tea bags or pieces of broken Styrofoam on the inside of the pot over the holes.

If terracotta or stone pots are used, soak them in cool water before adding the soil. Otherwise the pot will absorb the moisture from the soil and the plants will wilt. In addition, place a small plastic pot, 2 or 3”, in or near the middle. Pour the water into the small pot. This way the water goes to the roots of the plant and the soil will not spill. How much soil does a pot need? An 8-inch pot holds 1 gallon of soil, and a 12-inch pot holds 3 1/2 gallons of soil. Most flowers and vegetables need at least an 8-inch depth of soil.

Attention to water is the most important feature of potscaping. Pots dry out quickly. When the temperature reaches 112*, the pots will need water twice a day. Place a number of pots in a circle so the moisture from each will enhance all the others. To make life easier, consider running irrigation lines to each pot. Should there be no one available to water, the plants will not suffer.

Small plants are not the only ones to be planted in pots. Try a dwarf lemon in a very large pot, or flowering shrubs, such as a floribundi rose, Artemisia, lilac, or others one might find at a garden center. Don’t forget about lilies, and all kinds of bulbs. Wheeled plant stands will be useful for the large planters. Otherwise, place the large pot where it is to be situated, and then fill it with soil as it will be impossible to move when planted. Be sure to give it “feet”.

Container plants cannot extend their roots for nutrients. By adding 2 inches of compost, or more for large pots, to the pot underneath the potting soil, the plant will have nourishment for several weeks. Use a liquid fertilizer such as fish emulsion and liquid kelp, or make compost tea or manure tea. Add several handfuls of compost or manure to a 5-gallon bucket of water, let steep for a day or two, then use. Dilute one quart of tea to one gallon of water and feed every two weeks. If a fish tank is in your home, use its water to feed and water plants.

Good container plants are those of the *Dianthus* family such as Carnations, Pinks, and Sweet William. Most of these are also fragrant, but ask the garden center to make sure, if you do, or don't, want a scent. The colors range from pink, purple, and red to white. Also these plants tolerate alkaline soil. Contrast with *Ageratum*, in shades of blue, either low growing or tall. Again be sure to ask, because the height depends on where the plant is to be used. A long-lived perennial, *Gaura* has small white flowers and is a Southwest native. Its Butterfly-like flowers are set closely on the stalk. Be sure to cut the dried stalk, as it readily self-sows.

Read about the plants to be in the same pot. For instance, don't plant a fern with a petunia, as ferns like shade and acid soil. Petunias prefer sun and a slightly alkaline soil. Use plants that have small or no flowers with bright colors. *Senecio* or Dusty Miller is a pale green that could be paired with *Bellis* or English Daisy. Oxalis can be yellow, a perennial, or greenleafed white, or purple leaves and purple flowers. These should be in pots by themselves, as the leaves are showy, and the flowers small. Thunbergia is usually a vine, but can be a shrub, in yellow or orange colors. Place a trellis in the pot for the vines. Try Bells of Ireland (*Mutucella laevis*), a tall green plant with insignificant flowers, with Primroses (*Primula*) which have many colors and is a low growing plant.

The characteristics of each plant must be considered before combining them in a pot, large or small. Questions to ask are these: How often does it need water? What are its nutritional needs? How much sun can it tolerate? Once these facts are known, then the combinations can be planned. Research is necessary. Try your imagination at creating beautiful potscaping. .

Lois H Lockhart April 2004 References: Amazing Annuals, Marjorie Mason Hogue; Annuals and Perennials, editors of Sunset Books; 53 Weekend Garden Projects, Nancy Bubel; Gardening Hints & Tips, Pippa Greenwood; Western Garden Book, Sunset Books.