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Saturday, March 15, 2008

Well-dressed garden

Adding perennials to your flowerpots creates zip

Marty Ross / Primary Color

Plant a few perennials with your colorful annuals and you'll find it really puts some pop in your flowerpots.

Hostas, daylilies, ornamental grasses, ferns and many other perennials are fresh and unexpected choices for pots, planters and window boxes. They're not going to bloom all summer long, as annuals usually do, but many perennials are actually better-known for their great-looking foliage than for their flowers. These hardworking plants give you lots of terrific texture and color throughout the season.

The silver, ferny leaves of Russian sage and catmint, for example, are striking whether the plants are in bloom or not. In combination with annuals such as verbenas or petunias, or with perennials such as coreopsis or Shasta daisies, they're stunning.

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If you're just getting to know perennials, planting them in containers lets you experiment on a small scale and a shoestring. Perennials are a step up from geraniums and marigolds, and they'll make you look like an expert even if you're not yet used to getting dirt under your fingernails.

Container gardening is more popular every year.

"It's a cheap way to start gardening if you don't have a lot of money to spend -- and it's not intimidating," says Stephanie Cohen, a garden designer, author and perennial plant expert who lives and gardens in Collegeville, Pa., not far from Philadelphia. "You can plant anything you want," she says. "I like some of the hostas in pots better than in the ground."

Cohen likes to plant perennials in pots with annuals, tropical plants and even shrubs. Her only rule is to make sure everything in the pot likes the same conditions. Shade-loving euphorbias and sun-loving daylilies will not thrive together, but if you plant salvias or sedums with the daylilies, and ferns or fancy-leaf acanthus with the euphorbias, you'll create combinations that will flourish and look fantastic together.

You don't need a formula for a flowerpot, Cohen says. Fresh ideas -- such as mixing in a few perennial plants -- keep your pots from looking too predictable.

"The old combination with a big spiky dracaena in the middle, and the red geraniums around it with a trailing plant on the edges -- that's so passe," she says.

Cohen likes pots of all sizes. Small pots for special plants that need a little extra attention are staged in clusters close to her house. Larger pots look good at a distance.

"Grasses and native perennials don't need much watering," Cohen says, especially when they're in big pots. They are a great choice for a pot placed directly in a flower bed. When you place the pot in a bed, try raising it a little, using flat stones or a pedestal, to make the pot stand out even more.

Interesting foliage often looks even more dramatic in a pot than in the ground. Dan Heims, owner of Terra Nova Nurseries in Oregon, plants fancy-leaf begonia Fireworks in a pot with Japanese painted fern Pewter Lace and coral bells (*Heuchera*) Cinnabar Silver to terrific effect. His wholesale nursery specializes in new perennial plants from around the world.



click to enlarge

Perennials make a splash in flowerpots, and a combination of plants makes the most of foliage texture. The color will look fantastic all season long. (Terra Nova Nurseries)



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More information

Notes on pots

Perennial-plant expert Stephanie Cohen waits until all danger of frost is past to plant her flowerpots. In her Pennsylvania garden, she plants in early May. She recommends starting with perennials in quart-sized pots.

Good potting soil drains well, but also retains moisture and is lightweight, so pots can be moved around. It is perfect for all plants in pots, but when you're planting perennials in pots, you might want to do what Cohen does. She adds a little compost to the bottom of her pots (potting soil and compost are available at garden shops). The compost gives plants some nutrition and prepares them for garden soil.

In warm climates, perennials can winter outdoors in pots. Where winters are severe, move the pots to an unheated basement or garage and water them well about once a month. Move them outdoors again in spring.

If you like, you can transplant perennial plants into flower beds at the end of the gardening season.

Bolder is better, Heims says. Another of his all-foilage pots combines the silver-splashed leaves of lungwort Dark Vader with Hakone grass All Gold, chartreuse-leaved coral bells Lime Rickey, a gold-variegated hosta and dramatic black mondo grass. The combination lights up a shady spot.

Heims, who is not known for understatement, planted another pot with red-leaf Tropicanna cannas and Peach Flambe heucheras. He calls this one Towering Inferno.

Ruffled coral bells, one of his favorite plants, stand out in pots even more than they do in the garden. They spread like petticoat frills around the edge of a pot and make a snappy contrast with either the spiked leaves of New Zealand flax or the lacy foliage of ferns.

One of Cohen's favorite annuals to plant with perennials is the sparkling Euphorbia called Diamond Frost, a drought-tolerant annual for sun or shade known for its pretty galaxy of tiny white flowers. She also likes to add Wave petunias, which are available in many colors, to pots with perennials.

"I do a lot of color echoing," Cohen says. Last year she planted a red daylily with a tropical banana with red variegation in its leaves, so the flowers of the one played off the foliage of the other. It looked fantastic.

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