



GONE GARDENING



Success with Container Gardens

By Zannah Crowe - Horticulturist, Monches Farm

Many Wisconsin gardeners try to get the most out of our short growing season by planting lush, colorful planters and container gardens in addition to their in-ground gardens. Here are some tips on creating and maintaining beautiful seasonal containers:

Selecting a Container

It may seem obvious, but you must start with a container with a drainage hole in the bottom. Without drainage it is nearly impossible to control the moisture levels in your pots.

There are many different types, styles and sizes of containers to choose from. Terra Cotta is an inexpensive choice that offers good breathability and develops a charming rustic look as it ages. It is not weatherproof, though, and will need to be brought in during the winter months to avoid cracking caused by the freezing & thawing of moisture in the material (the storage area need not be heated but it must be dry). Other types of containers that will require winter protection are glazed, cast cement and fiberglass. Iron is perhaps my favorite type of container not only because of its timeless beauty and elegance but also because it can be left in the garden year round and provides a focal point even during the winter months, especially if brimming with seasonal greens, berries, and twigs.

The Growing Medium

Probably the MOST important element for success is to use a quality soil or soil-less mix as your planting medium. There will be an initial investment incurred in purchasing quality potting soil but it will pay off in the beautiful results you will achieve from your plants. Your



plants will not thrive, and might not even survive, in the heavy bagged soil that is sold as "Topsoil". A good quality soil mix should be lightweight and, when squeezed firmly in your fist and then released, should crumble easily and hold together only slightly. Although I purchase fresh soil each year I also save my soil from year-to-year. I keep two large garbage cans in the back of my property to store soil from one season to the next and mix the "recycled" soil with the new for each season's planting.

Watering

Watering is another critical consideration. Seasonal containers quickly fill with the roots of their fast growing inhabitants and DAILY watering is necessary. In the case of small containers, or those placed in windy locations, twice daily watering may be necessary. If you're planning a weekend away during the summer you will need to find someone to tend to your plants during your absence.

Feeding

Frequent light applications of fertilizer will also greatly improve the performance of your seasonal containers. Although most quality potting soil mixes contain nutrients they are quickly leached out through the frequent watering necessary to maintain moisture levels. I find that a weekly mild

application (about 1/2 the recommended dose) of soluble fertilizer makes the difference between a Wow planting and a So-So planting.

Plant Selection

You'll notice that this is the last consideration rather than the first. Regardless of how fantastic the plants are that you select for your containers they will not perform well unless you've also selected an appropriate container, filled it with a quality planting medium and made arrangement to provide daily watering and occasional feeding.

The essential first step to selecting plants for your container is to evaluate the siting of your container, most critically the amount of sunlight it will receive. Five or more hours of sun is usually adequate for plants labeled as "full sun". Remember, too, that the morning sun is not as intense as the afternoon sun so shade loving plants that would burn in full afternoon sun can happily grow in a container exposed to morning sun.

Combinations

Having some knowledge of the growing habits of the plants you combine will help you in achieving a satisfying mix throughout the growing season. Visit a local nursery or garden center that employs knowledgeable plantspeople and ask for assistance in selecting plant

combinations. I usually start by asking the gardener to select one or two plants that they especially like and then help them to build combinations around those favorites. A common mistake that new container gardeners make is to select plants based solely on their flowers. While some annuals bloom heavily & continuously throughout the summer, many do not. Foliage plants, on the other hand, tend to get bigger & better throughout the entire growing season. Perhaps surprisingly, it is almost always a foliage plant that ends up being the showiest component of a mixed container planting! Many of the most admired planters here at the Farm in fact contain predominantly foliage plants, with an accent of floral elements.

Seasonal Changes

Most of us think of summer plantings when we think of container gardens, but the season can be extended by filling your container with other elements during the colder times of year. Start the spring with a planting of cool season Pansies surrounding cut stems of red twig dogwood and carry interest well into November with collections of ornamental gourds nestled in amongst cool season ornamental Kale or stems of curly willow or multi colored Broom Corn. If you have a weatherproof container even the winter season offers potential for abundant beauty with collections of greens and berried stems or interesting twigs.

