

Container Garden Design Basics

Container gardening is utilized by people for a variety of reasons. Containers of flowers or green plants add another dimension of design interest to an outdoor patio, 3 season room, or entryway. In Wisconsin, tropical or other indoor plants can be brought outside in the summer, adding an interesting element to the ambiance in the garden. People who live in urban environments or community living arrangements can still indulge their interest in gardening by growing flowers and vegetables on their deck, balcony, patio, or porch.

Whether you are growing vegetables or flowers, container gardening requires special considerations in regard to choosing containers, plants, and soil, and attention to watering and fertilizer needs. Check out this resource for the basics of container gardening.

<https://hort.extension.wisc.edu/articles/container-gardening/>

When designing containers for flowers, it helps to keep a few design principles in mind to make your container interesting and balanced.

Think About Color Schemes and Plant Combinations

A color theme for a container garden can help you select a good mix of plants. You can play off the color of your container, complement the color of nearby furniture, or even limit the color to lush green, but focus on leaf shapes. It's all up to you. Do what looks pleasing to you. However, when choosing plants, ensure they all need the same light levels and frequency of watering. Plant them in odd numbers, and be sure to have at least one "thriller", one "filler", and one "spiller" plant.

Thriller: These plants add height and a bold vertical element. Some options include plants chosen for foliage, and ornamental grass, or an upright flowering plants. Thrillers typically go near the center of a container or can be in the back of the container if it always faces a wall.

Filler: Fillers tend to be more rounded or mounded and serve to make the container look full. These are generally placed in front of or around the thriller. They often have flower buds, but could also be a plant with interesting leaves.

Spiller: Plants that hang over the edge of the container are considered spillers. This could be a cascading blooming flower, like a petunia, or a vine-like plants like sweet potato vine or ivy. If your container garden is seen from all sides, place spillers all the way around.

In this pot, the **thriller** is the spiky purple angelonia standing upright. Its multi-blossom flowers add interest and airiness. The **filler** is the purple /lavender petunias in the middle. Petunias can act as both fillers or spillers as they will grow over the edge of the pot, but you can keep them in check as much as you want by pruning them back occasionally. The **spiller** is the green sweet potato vine, which will readily spill over the pot and onto the ground. Again, prune them as needed. Notice how the greens and purple shades complement and repeat each other. This is an example of a pot to place in the sun.



Container gardening in the shade is full of options with colorful leaves, lush flowers, and dainty textured ferns. Plants that like the shade such as coleus, begonias, lysimachia, ferns, hosta, and coral bells have beautiful variations in leaf shape, texture, size and color as well as flower colors and shapes. Don't be afraid to incorporate perennials or even tropical plants that you can repot and overwinter in the house for next year.



The **Thriller** on this pot is the tall bright pink Fuschia plant, while the **Fillers** are two colors of coleus and a yellow flowered hibiscus. **Spillers** are ferns, ivy, and a trailing bright pink begonia. Notice how the colors in the various leaves complement and contrast with each other.

If your pot is big enough, you can choose more than one kind or color of fillers and spillers to indulge your desire for certain colors, textures, or leaf patterns. You're the boss! Plant what you love. If the planter will be seen from all sides, be sure to plant for 360 degrees. See the guide for number of plants for the size of your pot.

Limit the Number of Plants you use based on the size of the pot

Be careful not to overfill your container. If the plants are overcrowded, growth can be stunted both above and below the soil. Consider these recommendations for plants in 4 inch pots.

- 10" to 12" pot can hold 3-4 plants
- 14" to 16" pot can hold 5-7 plants
- 16" to 20" pot can hold 6-9 plants

Check this resource for more info on flower container gardens.

https://www.chicagobotanic.org/plantinfo/tips/container_gardening