

# Beauty CONTAINED

**A**h yes, springtime at the garden center. The sun is shining and the whole flowery, fragrant world lies before you. Do visions of last year's beautiful containers linger, bolstering your self-esteem and pushing you toward even greater heights? Or were last year's containers not so great? Do you wonder if you should even bother? Let us try to help.

## Taking Them Home

Sadly, many of our troubles with container gardening start before we place the first plant in a pot. They start when we come home from the garden center on a cold, windy and wet day (or hot, windy and dry—this is the Midwest) and plunk our load of plastic pots and trays in the driveway. What we have so carefully selected can decline from lush and lovely to desiccated and destroyed in hours if we fail to understand the critical transition from greenhouse to home.

Bedding and container plants are accustomed to spa-like conditions with just the right temperature, humidity, water and food, and certainly no wind. Since it is exposure to breezes and actual sunlight that slowly builds up the cuticle layer (waxy protective layer) on leaves, the foliage of a new plant is as vulnerable as a newborn baby's skin until it has been hardened off.

This process isn't as painstaking and intimidating as it sounds. Simply prepare a safe place for the newbies before you shop. Choose a place to store your plants until planting day, making certain that they will be protected from direct wind and sun. Since April and May are fairly mercurial in our area, assume that you will be lugging plants in and out of the garage for at least a few days. Rolling steel carts make that job a lot easier and most of them will

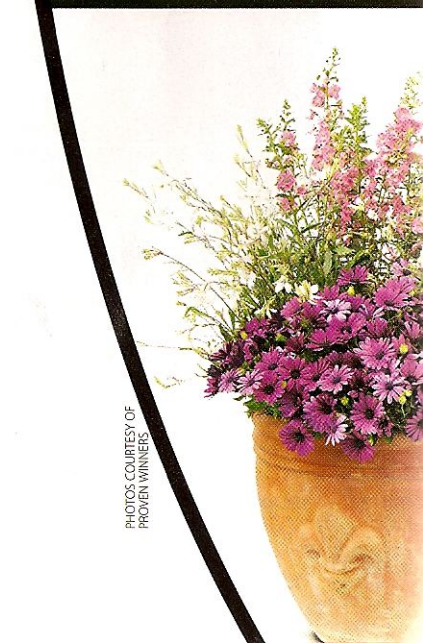
hold four to six flats or a couple dozen pots. It's unwise to leave the plants in the garage for days or weeks without sunlight since they will get leggy and then end up with a "sunburn" when you do take them out.

Growers use a very light potting mix that dries out easily, so be prepared to water each pot thoroughly as soon as you get home, and then at least once a day until they are planted. Once again, any wind can dry out these little plastic containers in a couple of hours. It's helpful to put down one of those big plastic trays used to line the bottom of animal cages (or a boot tray) to hold a bit of water so the plants can't dry out completely before you assemble your planters.

## Here's the Dirt

Now, assuming you're ready to protect your investment and have those steps down pat, let's talk about soil mix, fertilizer and water. If your eyes just glazed over and you're ready to skim this article for more interesting stuff, don't. We all have good intentions and most of us start out doing things right to insure the success of our containers, but we typically fall down around mid-summer. Or sooner.

It doesn't matter which brand of soil mix you use, but you do need to use one that's intended for planters. Don't use heavy garden supplements like topsoil or compost. It's also wise to change the soil in your containers



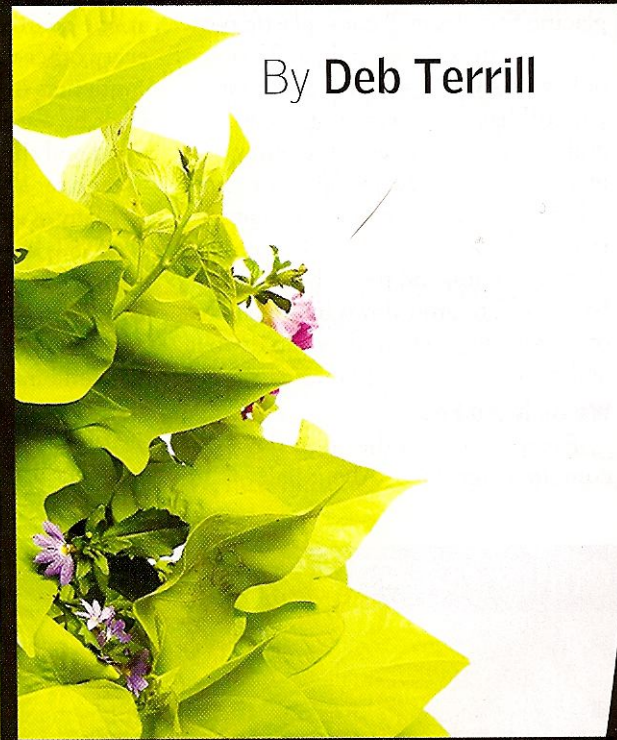
PHOTOS COURTESY OF  
PROVEN WINNERS



Want your containers  
to look like these?  
Follow our expert's  
tips for success.



By Deb Terrill



Top right: Angelface® Dresden Blue angelonia combined with dark purple and lavender petunias.  
Top left: Catalina® Pink torenia highlights a mix of black sweet potato vine, dark red coleus and yellow carex.  
Center: Supertunia® Mini Pastel Pink, chartreuse sweet potato vine and purple scaevola.  
Lower left: Soprano® Compact Purple osteospermum with pink angelonia, pink gaura and black-leaved coral bells (*Heuchera*)



every year. (Yes, you can probably get by with replacing only half of it each year, but only if you have had no diseases. Just be sure to mix the new soil in very well.)

Here's what you need to know. Plants in a container are being grown in an artificial environment that is stressful, and their roots need oxygen plus an easy supply of water and nutrients. If your soil is broken down, compacted or depleted, those roots will not be able to absorb water, air and nutrients to feed the plants. Nice, crumbly, fresh soil mix has what we call good pore capacity and it really is important. Soil mix is not just a means to anchor the roots.

It has become popular to take up space and lighten large containers by placing Styrofoam™ cans, plastic pots and so on in the bottom half. This only works well if you first make sure you still have adequate, unimpeded drainage and then cover the bulky material with landscape fabric or some other water and air permeable material. Bulk does not replace the need for drainage holes, and roots should not be allowed to grow down into a batch of Styrofoam™ where they can dry out and cause dieback on plants.

### We All Need Food

Everyone swears they feed their containers regularly. About half of

us are lying. Oh, we may start out well enough with a handful of Osmocote® or a potting mix that contains fertilizer. But remember the spa life those plants were living before we adopted them? It most likely included twice-daily waterings that contained a weak solution of fertilizer. And since we will be essentially flushing water through the soil almost daily for five months, we had better be prepared to replace nutrients for five months.

I find that the easiest way to do this is to buy a glass or plastic (weatherproof) bottle of liquid fertilizer and leave it near my watering can. You can use any balanced fertilizer like 10-10-10 and mix it into your watering can at one quarter to one-half strength every other watering. If you have large containers or many containers, reduce labor by watering them with a rain wand and then applying the fertilized water over the already wet soil.

Many of us are trying to reduce chemicals by using organic fertilizers like fish emulsion or seaweed. This is wonderful, but do note that organic fertilizers only work when you use a soil mix that contains real soil (as opposed to a soil-less mix). Soil microbes are required to break down organics and make their nutrients available to plant roots.

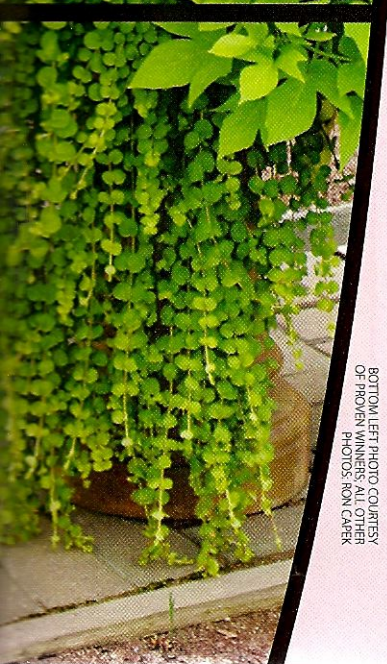
## Container Tips

- Use coffee filters to cover drainage holes. The shape allows them to fit almost any pot, and they are made for the task.
- Plants that need a little support can benefit from a few naturally pretty branches plunged into the soil. Contorted filbert, curly willow and dogwood work well. Ramp up the color in your containers by spray painting the twigs to match the flowers, foliage or the container.
- Place a couple of wood shims under heavy pots to make sure that drainage is not obstructed. Many garden centers sell "feet" on which large containers can rest.
- When adding drainage holes to metal or plastic pots, try to drill from the inside out to make sure that the extruded 'lip' that forms allows water to drain out instead of holding it in.
- When choosing plants for shade containers, head for the 'houseplant' section of the greenhouse or nursery. Dozens of tall, trailing and bushy tropical foliage plants now have bright vibrant colors like pink, yellow, orange and red in the stems and leaves. These are perfect for adding drama to darker corners.
- Add importance to average-looking pots (like clay pots) by elevating and displaying them in wire stands or on pedestals.
- A straight piece of rebar can be pounded into the ground to serve as a stabilizer when a planter or pedestal is placed over it. This is especially effective when you are placing tall, heavy plants in a tall, narrow container.



Top left: A colorful mix of pansies, yellow 'Moonbeam' coreopsis, rose-pink geranium, coleus and black sweet potato vine. Top right: Red and white caladiums provide season-long color. Lower left: Lemon Drop® primrose (*Oenothera*) and yellow-leaved ornamental grass work to show off the dark-leaved coleus. Lower right: Trailing dichondra is as dramatic as it gets; here the dichondra combines effectively with bronze coleus, red begonia and chartreuse sweet potato vine.





BOTTOM LEFT PHOTO COURTESY OF PROVEN WINNERS. ALL OTHER PHOTOS: RON CAREK

### Water, Water Everywhere?

Many a planter could thrive and be more beautiful if we were a tad more realistic about watering. First, we need to forget about Mother Nature as a water boy. It takes a one- or two-inch gully washer for rain to make its way through the vegetation and into the soil of our planters. If you find yourself saying “I don’t need to water with all of this rain” then you may not be watering effectively. It is easy to misjudge rainfall amounts. What many novice gardeners think of as a good rain is often less than a quarter of an inch. When you do water, make sure that you are watering gently and do so until the water runs out through the drainage hole. Later in the season, when roots may have filled up your planters, it is especially important to water slowly for a long period of time to make sure the water is soaking into the pot-bound roots, not just running down the sides of the containers.

If you are not one of those people who enjoy daily watering, then plan for your habits ahead of time. Polymer soil moisture crystals can be helpful, especially when you make up a small batch of the gel before planting and dunk the root balls into it before you place them in the container. Start small; a teaspoon of the crystals really will make enough to dunk a dozen or so plants. Don’t let the

product get into your drains and think about disposal before you buy it. Saucers also help to collect water runoff and keep it available to roots. It may sound simplistic, but it’s also helpful to actually have a hose and watering can out at all times and ready to use when the mood or the need strikes.

### Consider the Source

Finally, plant labels and garden center personnel can tell us which plants like sun or shade, but accurately determining what constitutes sun or shade in our own backyard is trickier than we may realize. An east-facing patio, for example, may seem to guarantee only a few hours of cooler morning sun. But without shade trees to filter the sun and the strong possibility of light-colored siding, concrete and other reflective or absorbent heat builders, that patio may burn up plants that need filtered or indirect sunlight. Conversely, plants from arid places usually need actual full sun, all day, to thrive. The notion that full sun means six hours per day may work for some plants but will reduce flowering and fruiting dramatically for others.

Pay attention to your planters; stick your finger down in the soil now and again; check to make sure the pots are draining freely, and snip off dead flowers. A little nurturing can yield big results. 🌱

## Beverly’s Moss Pots

**B**everly Nehls, an accomplished gardener in Kankakee, loves the look of antiquity and has plenty of shade. Moss seems to fit her needs and her garden sensibility perfectly.

Beverly begins by digging, not peeling, the moss that grows naturally in her garden. “I figure if it is already growing here; it must like the conditions. I try to get some of the roots but I don’t dig real deep. Then I just plant it over mounded soil in my pots.”

When asked about watering, Beverly says “I really don’t water every day, but I do water a lot when it’s dry, using rain water or distilled water.” She keeps chipmunks out of her pots by covering the newly planted moss with plastic netting and wiring it onto the pots. The moss grows right up through it. Heavy, frost-proof containers remain outdoors all winter where the moss stays green. Others are gathered into a more protected spot and watered occasionally until spring.

Although plain moss is fine and Beverly uses it to coat other garden elements like the concrete balls that she makes, she also uses moss in combination with dwarf conifers for miniature landscapes.



PHOTO: TERRY THORNTON