

FALL AND WINTER CONTAINERS

WHY I CHOOSE THE PLANTS I DO

...*ESPECIALLY THIS TIME OF YEAR!*

BY RITA RANDOLPH

EARTHTONE COLORS SURROUND ME IN THE FALL and it's time to redo my pots for the season. If my summer containers are kept watered and healthy, full overgrown summer plantings often still look great for early fall decorating and, with a little cleaning, I will get another month or so out of them. Sometimes all I have to do is add a full pot of ornamental grass behind or beside them and I'm done until it gets really cold. I choose grasses first because of their seasonal texture and I can tuck them in everywhere. Many are in full flower now and the especially nice fall color of some, like *Panicum virgatum* 'Northwind', are a sight to behold.

After cleaning up my older containers, I start on new creations. I've been observing the maturing fruits and berries, watching for developing fall color on any plant, and now it's time to use some of these mature specimens in new mixes made just for the fall season. Heuchera, carex, and violas set the tone for my first round of containers, as they do very well in pots, sometimes better than they do in the ground



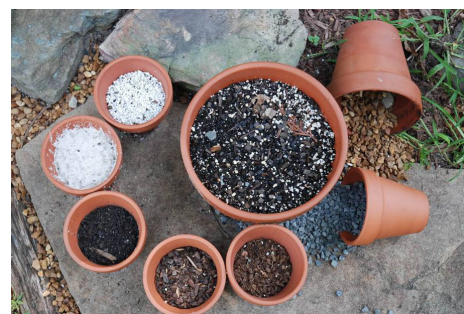
because of drainage issues. (Violas are useful as your watering barometer for mixed containers because they may wilt while some plants don't, and simply dry up.) But some of my choices may skip the fall season altogether by use of conifers and evergreens, for constant color and texture.

Evergreen Enjoyment

Conifers and evergreens are attractive all year, but I especially like using them in containers for a few years before they go in the ground. First of all, small conifers are less expensive, but they are perfect for decorating my patio until they are large enough to be seen in the garden. Second, medium-sized or larger conifers can create a focal point in an otherwise dreary or lonesome space. Conifers in the garden look great all year long, giving

A newly designed container with the essence of everything that says 'fall' to me. The golden glow of *Panicum virgatum* 'Northwind' sets the backdrop to the orange-fruited *Pyracantha angustifolia*. Underplanted with some of my favorite perennials, *Carex testacea* (Orange Hair Sedge), *X Heucherella* 'Tapestry' and *Heuchera* 'Southern Comfort', this container of earthtone foliage is complimented by adding a touch of 'Citrus Mix' violas. This arrangement will beautify my walk all winter long, then I can watch birds pick off the fruit!

you that cool, alpine feeling. Just don't forget to water them, as the signs of stress are not always apparent at first. Most folks kill their evergreen pots because they feel it's winter, and they don't need to water.



Our potting medium is a custom mix of basically 5 things; bark, peat or coir, compost, sand, and perlite. In addition, we add inert gravel for succulents and conifer collections.

Soil Preparation

All my conifers, evergreens, and perennials love the same rich compost mix I make for other containers, they just need more drainage, so I add inert gravel to the mix and top-dress with the gravel too. Conifers grow in the upper layer that contains leaf compost, bark, and topsoil; duplicating this natural habit will ensure better success.

Soil Winter Protection

Lining your pots with bubble wrap in winter allows for the expansion of freezing moist soil so your precious pots don't break. In summer, this method also helps with insulation from the heat and improves moisture control.



Bubble wrap in pots provides protection from winter freezing and summer heat.



A plastic nursery bucket used as a liner can not only prevent stoneware containers from breaking in winter but also will insulate the plant from hot summer sun. Just imagine touching a black pot after the sun has been shining on it! I once burned my hands on a pot outside our garden center, so the roots of the plant have to put up with that heat unless you put something between them and the pot.



This small tabletop container holds a *Juniper communis* 'Gold Cone', *Buxus sempervirens* 'Variegata' and the persistent foliage of *Carex oshimensis* 'Evergold'. A container like this will last two or three years before needing to go into a larger size pot.

Sometimes a single specimen may be all you need, especially if it's a contemporary setting or if there's a lot going on in your garden, but evergreen containers are designed much the same way as your spring and summer pots; choosing an assortment of heights, textures, and foliage colors. I try to use those with similar growth rates so the arrangement will last longer, but that doesn't stop me from using most any evergreen combination if it strikes me as looking pretty together.



An emerald green arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis* 'Smaragd') looks great next to the fine textured false cypress (*Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Filifera Aurea'). A *Cryptomeria japonica* 'Cyokuryu' has sturdy yet fine foliage that binds the arrangement together.



I don't always go with traditional fall colors. Sometimes a little more formality is called for. Shades of white are accomplished with foliage, not flowers, and is especially nice in this particularly dark, north-facing entryway.

I started with the beautiful *Muhlenbergia capillaris* 'White Cloud' (White Muhly Grass) for height, then *Euonymus japonicus* 'Albomarginatus' (Variegated Euonymus) for my strong variegated foliage, and around the base is a full *Acanthus mollis* 'Tasmanian Angel'. Draping to the ground is the dependable *Hedera helix* 'Gold Child' ivy that has lasted for years.



With a drop in temperatures and that crisp chill in the air, the first thing I do each fall is sow the seeds of some lettuces and greens. They quickly sprout and grow, giving me instant gratification. In just a few weeks, the simple lushness of the leaves is enough to make you hesitate before picking it! Lettuces and greens will tolerate temperatures close to freezing without damage and provide fresh salad or leaves for sandwiches until bitter cold weather arrives.



The simple addition of *Cymbopogon citratus* (Lemon Grass) added to a combination brings the garden mum arrangement full circle for the season. *Carex albula* 'Frosty Curls' softens the backdrop, and an heirloom garden mum, 'Seizan', cascades through the pumpkins.



My container of bird's nest fern (*Asplenium nidus*), a rex begonia, and selaginella looked so full at the end of summer, there's no reason not to bring it indoors.



Small conifers intrigue me. I didn't have the patience for them when I was younger, but now I love them. To see them arranged in this Zen way tells me I'm not alone in my quest for all the little dwarf conifers I can find!



Ilex crenata 'Sky Pencil' has a unique columnar form for evergreen container gardens. It's a slow grower so it helps to purchase the size closest to your needs. Large ones create drama in a container or the garden, especially when placed in staggered groupings. Smaller specimens fit nicely in porch and patio pots without taking up too much space.



Bring Your Treasures Inside

Oncoming cooler weather also tells me it's time to find a warm place to bring in some of my most treasured tropical plants. It doesn't even have to freeze for some damage to occur. Try to find an available window or supply of light when bringing in houseplants and don't forget to check for pests.

Houseplants can also be combined in containers for maximum effect. They make great gifts and centerpieces year round. I don't always "plant" them together, but rather leave them in their own growing containers and simply arrange them all together in a larger decorative one, using many of the design concepts we already use. Whether it's the rule of using three plants; the "thriller, filler, spiller" concept; or if it simply looks good together. I then cover the pots with decorative dried moss if necessary so the pots don't show. This way it's easier to swap out any plants that fail for fresh ones. When they need watering, the best thing to do is take them to a sink, spray them down and let them drain fully, drying out between soakings. Watering the foliage helps wash the leaves and maintain some humidity.

Even though I'm fond of many tropical plants, at the end of the summer I recommend making strict decisions about what to keep and what to compost. If it's a plant I can easily get again next year, and isn't really suitable for growing indoors, I'll let it go. I'll bring in anything hard to find and small enough to handle, and especially if they are happy with the lower light levels.

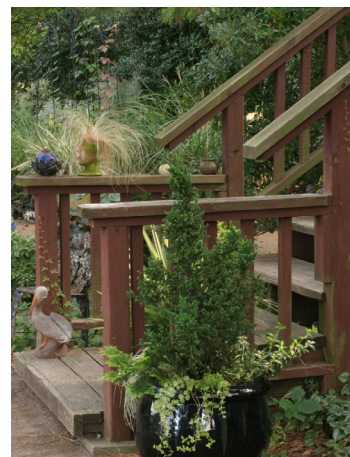


Rita Randolph is a designer, photographer, author, and self-described plant nerd who owns *Randolph's Greenhouses in Jackson, TN*, started by her parents almost 70 years ago. Randolph's is a founding licensee for propagating *The Biltmore Conservatory Collection* and the *Heirloom Conifer Collection*. Rita wrote the *Fine Gardening Container Gardening Special Issue* for 2009, and more recently, published her first book, *A History Of Horticulture*.

Ed Note: The photos in this article are courtesy of Rita Randolph. For a full-color version of this article, go to the HPS/MAG web site, www.hardyplant.org.



I love to create detailed container gardens of smaller stature for using on my steps or tables outside. Seasonal flowers can be added at different times, changing its many uses.



A *Cryptomeria japonica* 'Black Dragon' was given to me as a present. I only added a collar of mostly gold foliage, like variegated *Euonymus* and *Carex oshimensis* 'Evergold', to make it stand out.