

Top: Containers are considered the jewelry of a homeowners plant space.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHRISTINA SALWITZ

Bottom: *Helleborus* Rosemary offers a lot of bright blooms winter to early spring. PHOTO COURTESY OF SKAGIT HORTICULTURE



The approachable container

Helping consumers break the rules of design, for fun and profit

BY KYM POKORNY

TRADITIONALLY, ANNUALS FILL the shelves of garden centers come Mother's Day. The beautiful pieces wait for customers to pile them into carts, move through the check-out line and carry them home to fill containers and hanging baskets.

But the popularity of pots stuffed with annuals has waned, to be replaced by a growing interest in foliage, tropicals, perennials, shrubs and even trees gracing beautiful containers. Add water plants and edibles into the mix, and growers have a whole new — and large — palette to add to their inventory.

Years ago, a gardening magazine coined the term “thriller, filler, spiller” as a method for designing containers, according

to Christina Salwitz, a garden designer, photographer and owner of Personal Garden Coach (Renton, Washington). A tall plant thrills in the middle of the container, surrounded by smaller plants that fill in,

with trailing plants spilling over the edge. That's a good plan for beginning DIY'ers, she said, but it's not the hard and fast rule it's become.

“It is a famous formula to make designing a container easier,” Salwitz said. “The problem is that gardeners took it as gospel that you had to have something in the middle with everything dancing around it. It's a great idea but not always easy to sell. People are feeling militant about following the rules.”



The approachable container

Right: Popular tropicals can be combined with colorful annuals. PHOTO COURTESY OF SMITH GARDENS
Below: A mixed container has plants suited for a sunny area. PHOTO COURTESY OF SKAGIT HORTICULTURE
Center, left and right: High quality containers are long-term staples that homeowners will seasonally refill. PHOTO COURTESY OF CHRISTINA SALWITZ



'Plug and play'

Salwitz, who specializes in containers in her design work, looks at height, then thinks about color and texture when putting plants together in a pot. She — or her client — can then pull a wagon around a nursery and “plug and play.” Customers approach it just as they would in a department store shopping for an outfit.

At **The Garden Corner** in Tualatin, Oregon, owner Jonn Karsseboom arranged the nursery in blocks of color by both flower and foliage, so customers can plug and play as they wander.



“We’re trying to make it easier for people to design a container,” said Karsseboom, who bills his garden center as the Home of the Largest Hanging Basket in the World. “They can take something from each section and — voilà — they have an expertly done container. We don’t want it to be intimidating. Just like kids can color in a coloring book, certainly every gardener can create a container.”

Both Karsseboom and Salwitz urge garden centers to make buying a container more approachable. At a nursery she worked at years ago, Salwitz would take a whole pile of pots as they were taken haphazardly off the truck and arrange them purposefully by design or color in

the center of the nursery. The containers were delivered on Wednesday or Thursday and she would plant 30 or so. By Sunday the full pots, with a range of \$400–\$700, were gone. And, she pointed out, so were many of the empty pots and the plants to go in them.

empty pot one year and places it temporarily in the garden as an ornament, they’ll eventually be back to buy plants, according to Salwitz. Once planted, some of the plants will die or get too big and the consumer will be back for more year after year. It’s a never-ending business if done right.

To be most successful, garden centers should train staff to create containers and explain to customers how to plant them.

Give gardeners ideas of plants to choose or offer to take them around the nursery to help them combine selections and get past their fear of failure.

Most importantly, don’t allow turf wars and encourage selling across departments. Garden centers can lose sales if someone comes in to buy a pot and gets passed from salesperson to salesperson or left to design on their own, according to Salwitz. Sometimes the sale is easy and a pot is all the customer wants. They’ll be back when they can afford to add plants. And often, more containers.

“Garden centers get timid because they think they’ll be stuck with a bunch of pots,” she said. “They are not marketing them in the right way. You need to merchandise pots in a display that gets people excited and makes them think this is the garden jewelry they’re missing. If a pot is planted well, it will sell.”
Even if the customer only buys an



“Pots are addictive,” Salwitz said. “I can’t tell you how many \$400 containers I’ve designed and

Helleborus x nigercors 'HGC Ice Breaker Prelude' is an evergreen perennial that works well in containers. PHOTO COURTESY OF SKAGIT HORTICULTURE



they come back for more. They ask, 'Can I bring my pot back and have you plant it?' That's a cycle garden centers forget."

Buyers should look for high-quality pots, she added. Cheap ones will break in a year or two and discourage gardeners from buying more. It's vital for garden centers to know about well-made pots because most customers don't. If they're not told the advantages of a good container, they'll head to the box stores.

Foliage and monochrome heat up

Plants used in pots run the gamut from annuals to trees, but some trends have emerged. Crystal Cady, account manager at **Skagit Gardens** in Mount Vernon, Washington, believes foliage is coming on in a big way — as are monochromatic plantings. Many times, customers also want garden center employees or garden designers to create containers for them. Even during the pandemic, many people are starved for time.

"This winter, I was at a garden center to get greens for a wreath and I wasn't happy with the selection," Cady said. "I thought, 'Forget that, I don't have the time, so I'm going to buy a wreath for \$75.' I pride myself on doing it myself, but buying the wreath was so much easier. There are a lot of parents working and taking care of kids. They want 'plant it and forget it.'" >>

SINCE 1908

WEEKS
berry nursery

6494 Windsor Island Rd N
Keizer, Oregon 97303

Strawberries
Raspberries
Blackberries
Grape Vines

503-393-8112
Fax: 503-393-2241
www.weeksberry.com
plants@weeksberry.com

Blueberries
Asparagus Roots
Rhubarb Roots
And Much More!

SMALL FRUIT SPECIALIST
The Very Finest Quality!
Call or Write Today!

Nutrien Solutions

Visit your local Nutrien Solutions location today.

Cody Plath
Cornelius Branch | 503.640.2371

D-Stake Mill

A Universal Forest Products Company

503-434-5525

1726 SW Highway 18, McMinnville, OR 97218 • www.dstakemill.com

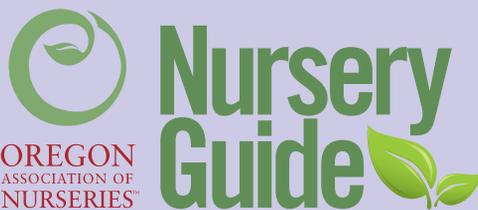
- **Shipping Materials**
- Pallet repair boards, shipping gates, tilt sticks.
- **Custom Assembly**
- Shipping racks, bare root crates and nursery pallets.
- **Planting Stakes**
- Multiple sizes available
- **Treated Lumber**
- Multiple sizes available

Lumber Products for All Nursery Needs

Finding plants wholesale

There is no shortage of plants on the market that will work in a container arrangement, but the OAN's Nursery Guide book and website is the resource that can help you find and obtain them quickly.

Simply log on to www.NurseryGuide.com and enter the plant's common or botanical name. You can make your search as wide (say, all of *Carex*) or narrow (say, *Carex morrowii* 'Ice Dance') as you like. Enter your search, find out who is selling it, then call or email to connect with the grower. It's that simple!



All of the selections in this article are listed on the site, and you'll find others if you search:

- *Calluna* (Heather) — 13 different selections
- *Carex* (Sedge) — 16 different selections
- *Colocasia* (Elephant Ear or Taro) — 6 different selections
- *Delphinium* (Larkspur) — 12 different selections
- *Dicentra* (Bleeding Heart) — 6 different selections
- *Digitalis* (Foxglove) — 2 different selections
- *Erica* (Heath) — 14 different selections
- *Euphorbia* (Spurge) — 11 different selections
- Ferns (various) — 65 different selections
- *Heuchera* and × *Heucherella* — 47 different selections
- *Hosta* (Plaintain Lily) — 71 different selections
- *Musa* (Banana) — 4 different selections
- *Rudbeckia* (Coneflower) — 7 different selections
- Plus untold numbers of annuals, conifers, berries, vegetables, succulents and more — just search by common or botanical name

Reaching out to your market

If you grow any of these plants, or others, you can add your company and start getting calls. Just log on to www.NurseryGuide.com to get started. You must be an OAN member.

Help us build our database

If you grow any plant, and it is not listed on Nursery Guide, no worries — we would appreciate knowing about it. Just let us know, and we will add it to our database. Contact us at nurseryguide@oan.org to get started. Our site lists the cultural information, description, photos, hardiness zone, mature height and width for each plant, and much more.

Bright blooms of the Primary Perfection™ mix work well in containers. PHOTO COURTESY OF SKAGIT HORTICULTURE



But, plenty of DIYers want to make up pots themselves and get inspiration from the containers they see already designed at garden centers. Salwitz doesn't care if people copy her designs. What matters is that they get ideas and buy the plants to go in the containers. She has noticed that what they're buying are perennials, ground covers and shrubs. Annuals haven't disappeared by any means, but the plants used in containers are branching out.

"Foliage is definitely a thing," Denise Mullins, director of plant innovation at **Smith Gardens** in Bellingham, Washington, said. "Especially plants that offer colors in their foliage. Things like variegated varieties of *Carex* are shockingly good in containers."

Ferns, heuchera and hostas fit in the fabulous foliage category. Tropicals like *Colocasia*, *Alocasia* and bananas also lend their dramatic foliage to containers. When Smith Gardens designs a large, high-end container, Mullins will often mix in tender tropicals or use them in a pot by themselves.

Tropicals are so popular they can sell for hundreds of dollars online — including one Mullins saw go for \$700. She likened it to the tulip craze of 17th century Holland, when tulips became so popular that one bulb could cost a year's salary. The inflated prices eventually caused a financial meltdown that ruined many a Dutchman. That's not likely to happen with tropicals, but they certainly are a money-maker in today's market.

Conifers are making their way into con-

Left: A combination piece features *Begonia* 'Ring Of Fire'. **Center:** The sun-loving container Arizona Sun is full of warm colors. PHOTO COURTESY OF SKAGIT HORTICULTURE

Right: Fill a container with plants of different heights for a classic composition. PHOTO COURTESY OF CHRISTINA SALWITZ



tainers, too, according to Karsseboom. He sells hanging baskets as small as a hand to so large that it takes two people to move them. When the conifer gets too big for the basket, the customer can plant it in the ground, which frees them up to buy new plants to fill the container again.

Containers as transitional spaces

For clients who balk at spending signif-

icant money on a choice conifer, Salwitz tells them to think of containers as transitional spaces, where plants are grown larger for the landscape.

“Take a weeping *Sequoia*: In a year or two, you’ll have a 10- to 12-foot tree,” she said. “You’re taking a \$100 plant and growing it into a \$200 plant. You’re investing in plants that will anchor the winter container and then go into the landscape as a more

substantial plant than they could afford.”

Even if customers aren’t convinced to purchase the \$100 plant, garden centers can make up for that left-behind conifer by >>

It /S Hip to Be Square

From cactus to liners to rose pots, T&R Company carries the entire line of Waterdance square containers.

For information on Waterdance products, greenhouse and nursery containers, soil, poly film, stakes, or our line of shipping racks, call Courtney Lewis-Borts at 503-951-3929 or email courtney.lewis@trlcompany.com



Waterdance



www.trlcompany.com



AT ALPHA... WE BUILT OUR BUSINESS BY TAKING THE TIME TO KNOW OUR CUSTOMERS AND THEIR NEEDS. ALL OF US APPRECIATE YOUR BUSINESS AND WE THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONTINUED LOYALTY. CALL US AT 800.293.1286, OR COME VISIT AND LET US KNOW HOW WE CAN SERVE YOU.

5050 HAZEL GREEN RD. NE • SALEM, OR 97305
WWW.ALPHANURSERY.COM

The approachable container

selling less-expensive plants that will cost as much, if not more.

As Cady of Skagit Gardens mentioned, annuals don't play the overarching role they once did. But there are some unusual annuals making waves. Salwitz turns to *Setcreasea*, *Oxalis* 'Iron Cross', many types of *Celosia*. She loves to use fancy basil like 'Magic Michael' (also called 'African Blue').

When it comes to perennials, Cady named heather (*Calluna*) and heath (*Erica*), especially dwarf varieties such as the *Calluna vulgaris* Beauty Ladies® series, as two genera gaining in popularity. Hellebores are appearing in containers in a big way, as are euphorbia, *Rudbeckia*, *columbine* (*Aquilegia*), bleeding heart (*Dicentra*), salvia, snow-in-summer (*Cerastium tomentosum*), larkspur (*Delphinium*), foxglove (*Digitalis*) and many types of succulents, both tender and hardy.

While edibles have been hot for years, gardeners — especially DIYers — have gone even more crazy for them, tucking blueberries, dwarf raspberries, decorative vegetables like 'Bright Lights' chard, kale and other greens into containers with ornamentals.

"People doing edibles in pots is huge, ginormously, huge," Salwitz said. "For the most part, they are less concerned about aesthetics and more interested in function. That said, there are many ways to make edibles attractive in containers, including the container itself."

Buying beautiful pots is an investment for both the consumer and nurseries, but Salwitz believes it's becoming more common, "It's getting easier and easier to get people to invest in higher-end containers. Pots that are so over-the-top no one cares if there are plants in them. It's like a cat with a shiny thing. Planting them gives you a higher price point. You're selling sex appeal, the whole outfit, not just pots." ☺

Kym Pokorny is a garden writer with more than 20 years' experience writing for The Oregonian (Portland, Oregon) and other publications. She is currently a communications specialist with Oregon State University Extension Service.

NURSERY GRADE:
BARK, SOIL
& CUSTOM MIXING



Delivery available throughout Oregon - 7 days a week!

 (888) 345-9085
www.laneforest.com

 **LANE**
FOREST PRODUCTS
The company to grow with