

Community Horticulture Fact Sheet # 78 Flowers for Containers and Rockeries

Plants for Containers

Gardening in pots, planters, boxes and baskets is nothing new, but it seems to be more popular than ever. Plants grouped in a container often have more impact than if the same plants were planted in a flowerbed. I believe that there are two reasons for this. First, they are elevated a little closer to eye level and they are massed, so that they stand out.

Beginning gardeners, who want to plant a showy container gardens, are often overwhelmed by the choices of plants at the nursery. This fact sheet will suggest a few you may want to try. First however, we need to go over a few fundamentals.

Containers

Anything that will hold soil can be used as a container. Assuming that you want to minimize maintenance, use a container as large as will fit the spot. The more soil mass the plants have, the less they depend on you for frequent watering and fertilizing. (Small pots in a sunny location may need watering daily and fertilizing weekly through the summer.)

A very effective way to get the elevation that I mentioned earlier is to place a smaller planter in the center of a larger one. If the base planter is large enough, you can stack up three of them to give you a pyramid of cascading blooms. Another way to get height is using hanging baskets or boxes attached to posts or buildings (think window box).

Some people use smaller containers, so that they can replace them as they fade with something at its peak. This can be very effective, though it can also mean more labor and cost. If you intend to move your containers, don't underestimate their weight. A one-foot square box will weigh at least 50 pounds. If the container will be located where there is public access, think big and use this weight factor to your advantage to prevent theft.

Soil

Purchase a good, porous planting mix at a nursery or garden center. Don't try to save money by using garden soil. Generally, regular soil is too compact and contains too much clay and too little organic matter.

Water and Drainage

Plants in containers can't send roots deeper when they run low on water, so watering is extremely important for success with container gardening. Use a planter with drainage holes and support it with feet or a layer of gravel to permit free drainage. Alternatively, big boxes (preferably at least 18 inches deep) can be built without bottoms and placed over soil, asphalt or concrete. The depth and lack of a bottom will prevent waterlogged plants.

Cover the inside of the hole with a clay pot shard or bit of window screen, before filling the container with soil. Do not fill the bottom with rocks or gravel "for drainage." This practice reduces available rooting depth and offers no advantage. Sometimes the fast-draining soil mixes drain a little too fast. With smaller pots and baskets, I like to place an old foil pie tin just above the bottom as I am

filling it with soil. It will trap about an inch of water and allow slightly longer intervals between irrigation. The same thing can be done using a saucer under a pot.

Fertility

Here again the plants are totally dependent on you. Feed the plants regularly throughout the growing season. Next spring, work some compost and a complete organic fertilizer into the worn-out soil as you replant. If you tend to forget to fertilize, look for a slow-release fertilizer that will dissolve bit by bit each time you water.

Grooming

To keep your containers looking their best, you will have to spend a little time picking off dead leaves and flowers. Besides improving appearance, deadheading or removing faded flowers, keeps the plant from making seed and encourages reblooming.

Plants

Almost anything can be grown in containers. I have selected a few to recommend that should perform well, but many, many others can be used. Don't be afraid to experiment. Unless otherwise noted, the plants listed in the attached table will work in either sun or partial sun.

Woody plants

Sometimes people like to have trees and shrubs in their containers for winter interest, as a background for seasonal flowers or to gain more height in the planting. Most will require a fairly large planter.

Perennials

These offer a distinct advantage over annuals in that they do not have to be replaced each year. Most are herbaceous, dying to the ground each winter, but some are valuable for evergreen foliage.

Annuals

Since they grow quickly, annuals are ideal for filling in between woody plants and perennials. Most bloom continuously all summer and into the fall, providing a big

splash of color. Plants are usually sold by common and cultivar names, so only the genus is given. A few of the plants listed here are actually tender perennials, which live over in mild-winter years.

Plants for “Rockerries”

Driving around urban Puget Sound in the spring, it's hard not to notice the “rockeries” in front of many homes and businesses. These are not true rock gardens, though many are made of rock. They are actually retaining walls, camouflaged with plants. The tapestry of white, yellow, pink, lavender and blue is quite spectacular.

The following list names plants often used in these gardens. Some hang down and some spread to fill cracks between rocks or timbers. Many are drought tolerant once established, so, if watering will be difficult, seek those out. Any good plant encyclopedia can give you more information. All of these plants are common and should be available at your local nursery. They all bloom in spring and can be wonderful in containers as well as on rockeries.

In addition, many bulbs like daffodils, tulips, grape hyacinth, *Scilla* (bluebells) & iris are used effectively can add spring color to rockeries or containers.

One plant you will not see listed is *Hedera helix* – English Ivy. It is very invasive and birds spread the seeds to parks and native woodlands, where it out-competes native vegetation. The fancy-leaf cultivars are safe to use in containers, but avoid plain-leaf ivy.

Woody Plants

Common Name	Latin Name	Height	Notes
False Cypress	<i>Chamaecyparis lawsoniana</i> , <i>obtusa</i> or <i>pisifera</i>	Varies	Use dwarf varieties
Fatsia	<i>Fatsia japonica</i>	8 ft.	Big, bold, tropical-looking foliage; needs part to full shade
Fuchsias, Hardy	<i>Fuchsia magellanica</i> and hardy hybrids	Most 2 – 5 ft.	Blooms summer to fall.
Heavenly bamboo	<i>Nandina domestica</i>	6 ft.	Many nice varieties available.
June berry	<i>Amelanchier alnifolia</i>	10 ft.	Birds like berries; fall color; prefers full sun.
Laurustinus	<i>Viburnum tinus</i>	6 ft.	White flowers late winter through spring.
Lily-of-the-Valley Bush	<i>Pieris japonica</i>	6 ft.	Flowers early; reddish new growth; needs part to full shade
Maples, vine & Japanese	<i>Acer circinatum</i> & <i>palmatum</i>	To 10 ft. +	
Pines, mugo & bristlecone	<i>Pinus mugo</i> & <i>aristata</i>	Varies	
Yew	<i>Taxus baccata</i>	Varies – takes clipping well	Use dwarf varieties; will take full shade.

Perennials

Common Name	Latin Name	Height	Flower color/season	Notes
Bergenia	<i>Bergenia cordifolia</i>	12-15"	Rose-purple/spring	Evergreen leaves often tinged purple/red
Bowles mauve wallflower	<i>Erysimum</i> 'Bowles Mauve'	36"	Purple/spring - fall	Has flowers practically all year
Catmint	<i>Nepeta X faassenii</i>	12"	Blue/summer	
Coral bells	<i>Heuchera</i>	12-24"	Pink, red/summer	Evergreen leaves
Day lily	<i>Hemerocallis</i> (mostly hybrids)	24-36"+	Yellow, orange, red/summer	
Hardy geranium	<i>Geranium</i> (many excellent species)	12-24"	Pink, purple, blue, white/spring - summer	For common, tender geraniums, see <i>Pelargonium</i> under annuals
Hosta	<i>Hosta</i> (many fine species)	16-30"	Lilac/summer	Grown for decorative, often variegated foliage
Leopard's bane	<i>Doronicum cordatum</i>	12-20"	Yellow/spring	
Lungwort	<i>Pulmonaria</i> (several species and named selections)	8-18"	Blue, usually opening from pink buds	Will take full shade; evergreen foliage
New Zealand flax	<i>Phormium tenax</i>	3-6 feet	Grown for evergreen foliage; may not bloom	Needs protection from temperatures below 20 F
Rudbeckia	<i>Rudbeckia</i>	24-30"	Yellow/summer	

Annuals

Name	Height	Flower Color	Notes
Snapdragon (<i>Antirrhinum</i>)	6-24"	White, pink, red, bronze, yellow	
Calendula	10-20"	Orange, yellow	May winter over well
English wallflower (<i>Cheiranthus</i>)	12-24"	Yellow, gold, red-brown	May winter over well
Godetia (<i>Clarkia</i>)	12-24"	Pink, rose, red, purple	Easy from seed
Coleus	18-24"	Grown for pink, purple, yellow, variegated foliage	
Impatiens	8-20"	Pink, red, white, orange, purple	Will take full shade
Lobelia	6-10"	Blue, purple, white	
Sweet alyssum (<i>Lobularia</i>)	4-10"	White, lavender, violet	
Geranium (<i>Pelargonium</i>)	6-24"	Red, pink, orange, purple, white	May winter over well
Petunia and Million bells (<i>Calibrachoa</i>)	8-12"	Red, pink, white, purple, blue, yellow and bicolor	
Salvia, Scarlet Sage Mealycup Sage	12-30"	Red, salmon, purple Blue, white	Prefers full sun
Marigold (<i>Tagetes</i>)	6-30"	Yellow, gold, orange, red-brown, cream	Prefers full sun
Nasturtium (<i>Tropaeolum</i>)	1½ - 6 feet	Orange, yellow, gold, maroon, cream	Easy from seed; vining ones may trail or climb to 6 feet
Verbena	4-12"	Red, purple, pink, white	May winter over well
Pansy (Viola)	5-8"	Purple, blue, orange, yellow, white, often bicolor	Planted in fall will give winter/spring color
Poor man's orchid (Schizanthus)	12-18"	Pink, rose, purple, white	Plant where it can cascade

Moss phlox (*Phlox subulata*) – white, pink to lavender blue
Sedums (various kinds) and sempervivum (hen & chicks)

Lambs' ears (*Stachys byzantina*) – lavender
Creeping thyme (*Thymus praecox*) – purple

Such a list as this might include the following, but I would use them with caution, because they can be very invasive:

Bishop's weed (*Aegopodium podagraria 'variegatum'*) – white
Sweet woodruff (*Galium odorata*) – white
St. Johnswort (*Hypericum calycinum*) – yellow
Creeping Jenny (*Lysimachia nummularia*) – yellow
Dwarf periwinkle (*Vinca minor*) – blue, lavender or white

Plants for "Rockeries"

These plants are commonly grown on retaining walls. Most drape down to cover the wall with spring blooms. They are also excellent choices for the edges of container gardens, where the plants can cascade over the sides.

Wall rock cress (*Arabis caucasica*) – white
Thrift (*Armeria maritima*) – pink
Aubrieta (*Aubrieta deltoidea*) – lilac, purple to pink
Basket of gold (*Aurinia saxatilis*) – yellow
Snow-in-summer (*Cerastium tomentosum*) – white
Cottage pinks (*Dianthus plumarius*) – pink to fuchsia
Heaths & Heathers (various kinds)
Perennial candytuft (*Iberis sempervirens*) – white

Lithodora (*Lithodora diffusa*) – true blue

