



Colourful potted annuals at Driftwood

# BOUNDLESS *possibilities*

Containers allow wonderful scope for creativity and almost any plant can be grown in them – from flowering annuals to compact fruiting plants

WORDS AND PHOTOS: Leigh Clapp



Well-placed pots can transform a garden. They can set the style and tone, make strong statements or act as ephemeral highlights. Consideration therefore needs to be given to the choice of containers and the plants that will reflect and enhance the mood of your garden as well as the architecture of your house. Bold pots with architectural plants can look stunning in a courtyard, while an eclectic collection of different sizes, colours and textures is more suited to a cottage garden. Even if your space is limited to a windowsill, balcony or tiny plot, there are endless ideas to try.

Container plants can act as focal points or to draw the eye to different areas. They are also practical for growing tender plants that can be displayed then overwintered inside, as well as allowing you to grow plants for different soil types that wouldn't do well if planted in the open ground. The advantage of container gardening is its extraordinary flexibility. Seasonal displays can be moved around. Filling gaps in the borders with potted blooms is a great trick, and where space is limited, such as down the side of the house, long planters are a good solution. Pots allow you to place plants where no plant could normally grow, such as on windowsills, rooftops, walls, transforming and softening a bare patio, or encircling the paved perimeter of a pool.



A pretty combination of pelargoniums with a standard daisy is enchanting for a cottage entrance

Select your containers for their design as well as functionality, and try to visualise the effect you are after as certain materials and styles have a natural affinity to particular settings. Don't be afraid to be creative though – the range is diverse, with new and recycled options including metal, wood, ceramic, stone, terracotta and plastic. You don't need to restrict your choice to bought containers. Anything can take your fancy, such as old baskets lined with plastic, olive oil cans, coalscuttles, crates, ancient watering cans, chimney pots or industrial salvage. Consider the visual balance between the plants and the container as well as the arrangement of pots. Whatever you choose, ensure that your pot is large enough for your chosen plants. Practical considerations include the durability, porosity

and weight of the container.

Many of our wonderful Sussex gardens have inspiring displays of containers. Geoff Stonebanks, publicity volunteer for the Sussex National Garden Scheme, uses a plethora of pots and containers in his coastal garden Driftwood in Bishopstone, Seaford. It was the joy of experimenting with containers through trial and error that actually helped Geoff learn about gardening and the conditions in his terraced back garden, which measures 100ft by 40ft. Their potential to be moved and combined in different groupings allowed him to format colour schemes and make decisions on where they looked best. There are around 300 in the matured garden, ranging from simple plastic pots, through terracotta theatres, to teacups planted with succulents and cacti. Some even now have a dedicated irrigation system. It's intriguing to discover that much that appears to be planted in the ground at Driftwood is actually in containers, so densely planted, positioned and hidden it is quite an illusion. Geoff says: "If you plant like me on the central steps, you don't need expensive, good-looking containers either, as no one can see them once the blooms tumble over them. Containers are so versatile, offering the chance to grow anything from bedding plants to shrubs, fruits, vegetables and even small trees. They are great gap-fillers too. I have about ten containers, which I store out of sight in the early summer, then, as other plants go over, I can bring out the chrysanthemums and drop the container in place to flower into the late autumn. Other invaluable annuals for me are the petunias. Some of them are not keen on heavy rain, which can beat them down to a pulp, but on balance, I find them well worth including in my planting schemes. Verbena and bacopa are two other regulars, both of which, in my experience, can last through the winter, providing it is not too harsh."

A town garden in Horsham, 4 Ben's Acre, also opens through the NGS and is notable for the creative way owner Pauline Clark uses containers to form charming vignettes. Set on a slope with

## GET THE LOOK

Use good peat-free-compost for short-term planting and soil-based composts for more permanent plantings

Life can be a little tougher in containers, so give them lots of TLC with water and feeding

Position your containers where they will be seen – to welcome you home each day, viewed from a window,

grouped on steps, or around a sunny seat

Select plants that are relatively easy to grow and that will perform well over a long period of time, such as petunias, pelargoniums, fuchsias, pansies, salvias, hostas, heuchera, asters, aeonium and agapanthus

Containers let you grow tender plants in the garden through summer that can

then be moved inside over winter

Large pots look good even in small gardens and actually give the effect that your garden is larger

A pair of matching pots on either side of a door is a classic statement

Potted plants can disguise a bare patch and create an instant flower-filled garden

steps and terraces, the garden belies its size of 100ft by 45ft, and gives lots of opportunities for visual punctuation from containers in a range of different micro-climates – some sunny, others shady – forming a series of smaller enclosures or rooms. It's not just the placement of containers that is inspiring, but also the range of quirky up-cycled finds, many discovered in markets, including vintage glazed pots, baskets and even a pair of old running shoes. Containers are assembled in themes of colour, plant types and seasonal combinations and all carefully thought through so they will thrive in each micro-climate. A collection of succulents in terracotta pots accompanied by terracotta jugs and tiny pots placed on their sides line the steps; a group of ornamental grasses with long flowering perennials draws the eye; and an eclectic theatre of small containers by a Buddha creates a contemplative corner. At Great Dixter in Northiam, one of the most exciting gardens of our time, containers are used to mark the seasons. Clusters of early bulbs in spring give way to summer colour, followed by autumnal delights, with the displays changed or reassembled every four to six weeks. Some 50 pots may be clustered by the door, others nestling on paved areas in the garden, all artfully gathered.

The beauty of containers is that if a pot is not looking its best it can simply and easily be swapped out for another. A tip



**ABOVE:** Short on space? Use the vertical option

here is to have pots waiting in the wings, ready for their starring roles. Although the containers are different sizes, continuity is provided by all being terracotta. Another wonderful design element to emulate is that as with a border, the element of height is carefully considered. There are tall plants, sometimes just used for foliage rather than flowers, or even with vines on trellises, positioned at the back, layered down to groundcovers in small pots at the front of displays. Textures and shapes are always positioned for variety and design. Drama may come from cannas, movement from grasses, or colour from vibrant pelargoniums and poppies. At every visit the effect will be different, and as with the mix of traditional and experimental gardening across the site, this brings people back regularly.

Finally, for instant mixed displays that celebrate the season, take a visit to your local garden centre for inspiration. My advice is to choose a centrepiece plant, then don't be afraid to take some pots off the shelves and create a combination on the ground before simply putting back the plants that don't work in your scheme. Keep in mind that arranging plants in pots is similar to arranging flowers in a vase, except that these plants will grow into your arrangement

and as nature is unpredictable there may be some surprises in shapes and growth patterns. Once home, set aside a spare hour or so, grab your handful of plants and paint a picture of colours and textures that appeals to you. Whether your style is minimalist, contemporary, classic or rustic, whether you are a gardening beginner or an expert, you can achieve success in a pot – and in next to no time. ♦

### GOOD TO KNOW

Check websites to see if gardens are opening and what social distancing measures to observe:  
[driftwoodbysea.co.uk](http://driftwoodbysea.co.uk);  
[greatdixter.co.uk](http://greatdixter.co.uk);  
[ngs.org.uk](http://ngs.org.uk)

### LOCAL SOURCES OF CONTAINERS

#### Pots and Pithoi,

The Barns, Turners Hill, RH10 4QA  
 The world's largest collection of Cretan terracotta pots, display, shop, café  
[potsandpithoi.com](http://potsandpithoi.com)

#### Architectural Plants,

Pulborough, RH20 1DJ  
 Contemporary containers and  
 The Terracotta Pot Company  
[architecturalplants.com](http://architecturalplants.com)

**BELOW:** A teacup of alyssum at Driftwood



# July Action plan



PLANT OF THE MONTH

## HEMEROCALLIS DAY LILY

- Hardy perennial
- Produces lots of flowers through summer, with each lasting a day
- Plenty of bright colours to choose from
- Clump-forming strappy leaves

### Growing notes

- Easy care
- Plant in borders and en masse
- Maximum spread in two to five years
- Can grow in poorer soils
- Ideally moist, well-drained soil
- Full sun
- Plant in spring or autumn

## A touch of romance

Protect yourself from the sun by creating a shady spot to sit in. As well as providing shelter you can create a microclimate that will trap moisture, needing less watering. Smother pergolas or arbours with climbing plants such as a grapevine, roses, honeysuckle or ornamental hops. Underplant with shade-lovers such as hellebores, ferns or hostas. Drape with hanging lanterns and candles for dining outside on balmy summer evenings.



## THE HEAT IS ON

July can be a dry month, so ensure plants and lawns are watered wisely. To reduce water loss due to evaporation, water in the evening, a little at a time – frequently is better than flooding. Deadhead to encourage new growth and repeat flowering. Add some drought-tolerant plants that store water, such as succulents, ones with small, hairy, silver leaves or spiky-leaved plants, such as perovskia, salvias and eryngiums. Feed roses, tomatoes and containers.



## ON THE PLOT

Time to sow directly spring cabbage, autumn/winter salads, oriental vegetables, radishes and turnips. Containers are great for successional cut-and-come-again salad leaves and also for a range of herbs. Last chance to sow runner beans for a late crop. Harvest beetroot and other crops such as courgettes while they are still young and tender. Water vegetables regularly to aid healthy development.