

Plants Contained for Patio and Decks

Plant Containers for Color on Patios and Decks Larry Williams June 15, 2003



The sago palm in this large container gives permanent structure while the 'Purple Wave' petunia adds seasonal color.

You can't put a flowerbed on your backyard deck. Sometimes it's difficult or impossible to dig and plant under a large, old tree because of roots. But you can place a splash of color in those drab or difficult to grow areas by using container gardening.

Many times I'll forget about the option of using a decorative container with ornamental plants that can help brighten an area within a landscape. But sometimes a container with appropriate plants can be one of the better options in difficult areas in a landscape.

Annuals will grow sensationally in those troublesome landscape areas – in containers. But annuals in containers are not foolproof. You still have to select the right plant for the right place, choose an appropriate container with drainage holes, use a good potting mixture and follow good maintenance practices.

There are some perennial plants, such as verbena or lantana, that you can use in your containers, but it's easiest to treat them like annuals and discard them after their seasonal flowering. There are many annuals from which you can choose. Impatiens and begonias do well in shaded places and remain in flower almost continuously. Caladiums also do well in containers in shaded places. They don't bloom but they have very colorful leaves. There are types of coleus, with their colorful leaves, for both sun and shade. Torenia, angelonia, and Plectranthus 'Mona Lavender' grow well in filtered sunlight.

It's hard to grow container plants in full sun. But there are some annuals that do well. Annual vinca (periwinkle), portulaca, melampodium, and are heat tolerant and do well in full sun. Wave petunias, such as Purple Wave, also do well in full sun and are fairly heat tolerant.

Those are just a few annuals to consider. But there are others. You might like to try salvia or ageratum. And there are sun-tolerant begonia. Don't be afraid to try other plants. See what will work for you.

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Plant annuals in a big enough container (three to five gallons) to allow the plants to grow. Be sure to plant them in a mixture – a commercial mix or your own – that drains well. A soil mix that holds too much moisture will almost certainly mean sure death for the plants because there will be insufficient oxygen in the root zone.

Good quality commercial mixes, available at some of the local nurseries, are excellent for growing annuals in containers. They have enough lime and fertilizer in them to get plants off to a good start. And they hold moisture and still provide good drainage.

If you prefer to make your own soil mix, use one part peat moss, one part pine bark (pieces smaller than an inch), and one part perlite. Add fertilizer at the rate of a half a cup per bushel of mixture. Add a third of a cup of lime per bushel.

You can mix in a season-long slow-release fertilizer at planting. Follow the product's directions for amount and frequency of application. Or fertilize the plants with a non-slow release fertilizer every three to four weeks for even growth during the growing season. Again, follow the product's directions for amount and frequency of application.

Finally, make sure to water to keep the potting mixture evenly moist but not soggy wet. On the other hand, don't allow the potting mixture to become bone dry, either.

** Larry Williams is extension horticulture agent in the University of Florida IFAS Extension in Okaloosa County .*