

## Create Colorful Pots of Color for Winter



*Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: Cool-season annuals, such as 'Purple Wave' petunias, can be combined with other plants such as the sago palm in this container, to brighten winter and early spring days.*

*Daniel E. Mullins is Extension Horticulture Agent for the University of Florida IFAS Extension in Santa Rosa County. For more local gardening information, visit the UF-IFAS Extension website for Leon County at <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu>*

November 4, 2004

**B**right flowers provide a welcome sight during the sometimes drab days of winter. Even if you have limited space, you can still grow cool season flowers in pots and planters. Small splashes of color, such as that provided by a pot of pansies on your patio, can do much to brighten your mood on cold, dreary winter days.

Purchase containers or thoroughly clean old ones, obtain new potting mixture, and select from the many seasonal flowering plants at local nurseries and garden centers now.

Almost any container will do as long as there are holes at or near the bottom, allowing excess water to drain from the potting mixture following irrigation. Pots and planters are available in plastic, fiberglass, clay, wood, and copper. If a copper container is used, it should be lined, or a plastic pot containing the plant can be placed inside of it. The copper surface should not be allowed to contact the potting mixture or plant roots.

The required container size varies, depending upon the kind and number of plants to be grown. Choose one that is ten inches in diameter or larger because winter flowering plants grown in smaller containers can quickly become pot bound and difficult to maintain in tiny pots.

Choose a high quality potting mixture in sufficient volume to fill the containers. Be very selective when shopping for this product. There are some very good potting mixtures on the market while some are too fine textured for growing flowers well. Good aeration in the potting mixture is essential.

Look for a relatively lightweight potting material. Avoid those mixtures that are heavy and fine textured and that resemble soil. They are difficult to wet, and once moistened, hold too much water, depleting the plants'

roots of oxygen.

The high quality potting materials are usually made of a combination of peat moss, and either horticultural grade perlite, vermiculite, or pine bark to provide some larger pore spaces. Also, the premium products often have the pH adjusted to an acceptable level and may also include starter fertilizer. Some of the local nurseries sell the same potting mixtures that they use for their plants.

Some of the best flowers for growing during the winter include petunias, pansies, dianthus, and snapdragons. These should all be grown in full sun. Lobelia can also be used if you can protect the container during extreme freezes. Primulas can be used in somewhat shaded areas. But don't plant primulas until the weather is consistently cooler, well into December. Other possibilities for sun include nemesia, ornamental kale, alyssum, delphinium, and calendula. Don't be afraid to plant two or more different kinds of flowers in the same container. Just space the plants nine to twelve inches apart.

The flowers are usually sold in cell packs with each cell being two to three inches in diameter. They are also sometimes offered in four inch containers. Though more expensive, those transplanted from four inch containers usually provide more color sooner.

Once the container garden has been assembled, place it outdoors on a porch, patio or deck that receives full sunlight if possible. If not, choose an area that is exposed to at least six hours of direct sun each day.

Maintain the container garden by watering thoroughly as needed and fertilize lightly about once a month to keep the plants vigorous. Clip off old flowers as they fade to encourage repeated blooming. If properly established and maintained, some of these flowers can provide color from now until May.

**Question of the Week:** I need to prune my crape myrtles heavily. Is it too late in the year?

**Answer:** I do not recommend the heavy pruning of crape myrtles at any time, especially at this time of year. Pruning stimulates new growth which could be killed by the first freeze, which may be as early as mid-November. If you must prune heavily, wait until late February or early March.

###