

# fine Gardening

## Containers that Keep Kicking into Fall

Pick plants that stand up to frost

By Dennis Schrader



The transition from the exuberance of summer, when my containers are looking their fullest and most luxuriant, to the first frost, when the more tender plants collapse, used to be an upsetting time for me. But over the last few years, I've learned that the onset of autumn doesn't have to mean the end of the container gardening season.

A trip to the garden center in September or October seems, at first glance, to yield the same old choices of mums and pansies. Although I still rely on pansies, grasses, kale, and garden mums to dress up my

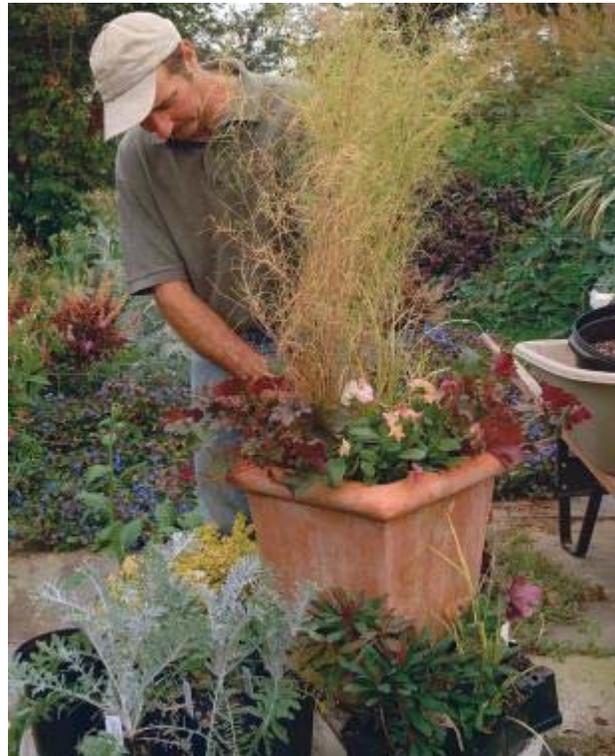
containers, I also use many other plants that look good into fall.

Another less expensive and more readily available source for plant material is my own garden. Taking a division from a clump of coral bells (*Heuchera* spp. and cvs.), a sedge (*Carex* spp. and cvs.), an ornamental grass, or a sedum

(*Sedum* spp. and cvs.) and potting it up in summer for use in my fall containers saves quite a bit of money. Occasionally, I'll even use a plant that was part of a summer container that can withstand a frost or two, like English ivy (*Hedera helix* cvs.) or golden creeping Jenny (*Lysimachia nummularia* 'Aurea'). Other decorative materials, like cornstalks, branches, and even gourds or pumpkins can be used to round out the picture.

## Repeat colors and textures

I use so many types of plants in so many pots that I've had to come up with a design strategy that works. My biggest concern is providing continuity to the design, and I do this typically by potting up a few large combination planters with an assortment of plants. Then I repeat the colors and textures I've used in the mixed planters in smaller pots with single plants and position the pots in pleasing arrangements. In general, I use crisp autumnal shades to reflect the colors of the surrounding landscape.



Photo/Illustration: Virginia Small

A fall container garden doesn't have to be elaborate to be attractive. I created a container combination using two terra-cotta pots: a tall square pot with an 18-inch opening and a shorter, round container. I placed them along the edge of a path just off my patio, which helps draw visitors into the garden. For the taller pot, I chose muhly grass (*Muhlenbergia dumosa*) as my central plant, then added an acorus grass (*Acorus gramineus* 'Ogon'), whose bright gold-and-green-striped foliage contrasts nicely with the feathery muhly grass. I added two maroon-leaved coral bells (*Heuchera* 'Stormy Seas') and similarly shaded pansies (*Viola* × *wittrockiana* 'Antique Shades'), which work nicely with the coral bells' foliage.

## TALL POT

Muhly grass

'Ogon' acorus grass

'Stormy Seas' coralbells

'Antique Shades' pansies

## SHORT POT

Mexican feather grass

'Redbor' flowering kale

'Delta Orange' pansies

'Emporer Rose' flowering kale

Golden creeping Jenny

For the complementary container, I didn't need another plant for height, but I did want to mimic the grass, so I chose the low-growing Mexican feather grass (*Stipa tenuissima*). The wispy, blond, hairlike foliage of the Mexican feather grass softens the face of the pot behind it and, in addition, provides a good backdrop for the large, coarse, deep red leaves of flowering kale (*Brassica*

*oleracea* 'Redbor'). These two plants make a vibrant combination when placed with a more traditional ornamental kale (*B. oleracea* 'Emperor Rose'), golden creeping Jenny (*Lysimachia nummularia* 'Aurea'), and the glowing orange blooms of pansy (*V. × wittrockiana* 'Delta Orange').

Once I get the containers in place, I water them using a balanced, water-soluble fertilizer. Because the weather is cooler, the pots don't need to be watered as often as summer pots do, so I get to spend more time sitting back and enjoying the bounty that fall has to offer. And come December, if the snow and ice hold off long enough, the ornamental kale, dried grasses, and seed heads of some of the perennials from my fall containers might even make it into a few of my winter displays.

## Coordinating colors



Limiting the color palette in this case to mostly purple, burgundy, orange, and yellow helps create cohesion in this large group of containers.

### PLANT KEY

1. *Phormium tenax* 'Atropurpureum'

2. *Salvia leucantha*
3. *Chrysanthemum* 'Luciane'
4. *Chrysanthemum* 'Valerie'
5. *Lysimachia nummularia* 'Aurea'
6. *Bergenia* 'Autumn Glory'
7. *Viola* × *wittrockiana* cvs.
8. *Euphorbia amygdaloides* 'Purpurea'
9. *Brassica oleracea* 'Redbor'
10. *Heuchera* 'Stormy Seas'
11. *Muhlenbergia dumosa*
12. *Dahlia* 'Powder Puff Mix'

## Fall Container Choices





### **Plants for height**

Flax lilies (*Phormium* spp. and cvs.), USDA Hardiness Zones 9–10

Ginger lilies (*Hedychium* spp. and cvs.), Z 8–10

Grasses (*Miscanthus sinensis* and cvs.), Z 4–9

Mexican feather grass (*Stipa tenuissima*), Z 7–10

Muhly grass (*Muhlenbergia dumosa*), Z 8–11

### **Plants for foliage or flowers**

African daisies (*Osteospermum* spp. and cvs.), Z 10–11

Asters (*Aster* spp. and cvs.), Z 4–8

Chard (*Beta vulgaris* ssp. *cicla* and cvs.), annual

Chrysanthemums (*Chrysanthemum* spp. and cvs.), Z 8–10

Coral bells (*Heuchera* ‘Stormy Seas’), Z 3–8

Flowering maples (*Abutilon* spp. and cvs.), Z 8–10

Hebes (*Hebe* spp. and cvs.), Z 8–11

Lavender cottons (*Santolina chamaecyparissus* and cvs.), Z 6–9

Marguerite daisies (*Argyranthemum* spp. and cvs.), Z 10–11

Nemesias (*Nemesia* cvs.), annual

Ornamental cabbages and kales (*Brassica oleracea* cvs.), annual

Pansies (*Viola* × *wittrockiana* cvs.), Z 4–8

Pigsqueaks (*Bergenia* spp. and cvs.), Z 3–8

Shrubby haloragis (*Haloragis erecta* cvs.), Z 6–10

Snapdragons (*Antirrhinum majus* cvs.), annual

Spurges (*Euphorbia* spp. and cvs.), Z 4–10

Stonecrops (*Sedum* spp. and cvs.), Z 3–9

### **Plants that trail**

Bugleweeds (*Ajuga* spp. and cvs.), Z 3–9

Deadnettles (*Lamium* spp. and cvs.), Z 4–8

English ivies (*Hedera helix* cvs.), Z 5–10

Golden creeping Jenny (*Lysimachia nummularia* 'Aurea'), Z 4–8

Jasmine (*Jasminum officinale* 'Fiona Sunrise'), Z 9–10

Millionbells (*Calibrachoa* cvs.), annual

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