



CONTAINER PLANTS WITH STAYING POWER

Darwin may not have considered our patio plants when theorizing evolution, but survival of the fittest applies when looking for container plants that will persevere through Midwest summers. Heat and drought can take a toll on window boxes and deck planters, so finding plants that can endure the elements and keep their good looks is key.

A little known annual that holds up well in containers as well as in the garden is *Melampodium*. This member of the daisy family loves sun and heat. Its petite, golden yellow flowers bloom profusely and do not need to have their spent blooms removed, or deadheaded. Its mounded habit looks warm and welcoming in a pot by the front door but it can also be added to a "hot" colored mixed container of reds and oranges.

Another similarly shaped flower that merits attention for endurance is the narrow-leafed zinnia, *Zinnia angustifolia*. This plant has incredible flower power for its diminutive 6-inch size. Upright until its blooms cause it to tumble over, this zinnia is a perfect softening touch to the edge of a pot. It does not need deadheading, is mildew resistant and thrives in heat. Orange, gold, yellow and white varieties are available and perform equally well. 1999 All American Selection Winners, Zinnia 'Profusion Cherry' and 'Profusion Orange' are slightly taller plants with the same attributes of heat tolerance and disease resistance to promise a season long show.

A familiar grass that has taken container planting to new heights, is the annual purple fountain grass. Highly popular due to its burgundy foliage, this grass is not only a refreshing alternative to the more common spike, but an easy plant to combine with virtually anything. As the season progresses, it develops soft pink plumes which adds to its attractiveness. This grass can easily be the mainstay in a pot that starts out with pansies in the foreground in spring, replaced by petunias or verbena in the summer and a mum or kale added in fall.

Joining the Purple fountain grass in great foliage category is Coleus. This large group of plants can range in height from 8 inches to 4 or 5 feet! The broad color spectrum includes reds, oranges, pinks, greens and yellow. Newer introductions of sun-loving varieties do not fade in full sun, even though coleus is typically considered a shade plant. Whether planted in full sun or shade, its exotic looking leaves provide a fantastic contrast to companions such as geraniums, impatiens and ornamental grasses. It is dependable, low maintenance and gaining in popularity with the number of new varieties on the market.

Coleus are available in a wide variety of colors and combinations of colors.



Yet another durable container plant with outstanding foliage is *Helichrysm*, also known as licorice plant. Silver, fuzzy rounded leaves are most common though there are lime and variegated varieties as well. It has a cascading, branching habit that drapes over pots and weaves throughout its neighbors' stems and flowers giving it a very natural look. Window boxes are especially suited to this trailer and can often incorporate its pretty foliage in fall and early winter displays well after some of the flowering plants have given up. Silver blends well with most colors so this plant can rarely look out of place. The lime and variegated varieties are particularly attractive with bright shades of pink, purple or blue.

A trailing plant that blooms nonstop is *Petunia integrifolia*. Petite, magenta flowers centered with black bloom from spring until frost with little effort and even less care. This is a tough petunia making it a great choice for hanging baskets, window boxes or patio planters. *Petunia integrifolia* does not need to be deadheaded unlike many petunias. Look for a white-flowered variety this season.

The salvias are a diverse group of plants that are suited to many situations in the garden. For containers, the mealy-cup sage such as 'Victoria Blue' is a good choice to add height and a wonderful shade of blue to mixed plantings. *Salvia coccinea*, or Texas sage, has delicate coral, red or white flowers, making it a great filler for pots because it blooms nonstop. The culinary sages, *Salvia officinalis*, are also great additions to containers due to their attractive, fuzzy leaves which may be purple-toned, greenish silver or tricolor - a wonderful textural element. All perform well in the heat and sun and bloom until frost.

Tips for long-lasting containers:

- Use plants that perform well in our climate and are tolerant of heat, drought and even light frost.
- Choose low maintenance plants, such as those that do not need constant removal of faded flowers, known as deadheading. There are a number of plants that "clean themselves" thus remaining neater in appearance.
- Use foliage plants such as ivy and coleus to save time in maintenance and really give a pot interesting texture and color.
- In dry weather, pay close attention to watering needs. Daily or twice daily watering may be needed.
- Add a slow release fertilizer at potting time that will gradually release nutrients throughout the growing season. Or use a commercial water-soluble fertilizer every 2 to 4 weeks.
- Accept that some plants may die and remove them as soon as possible. Some garden centers offer a new crop of annuals in June and July for this reason. Freshen up pots by adding one or two new plants.