

# Potting MASTERPIECES

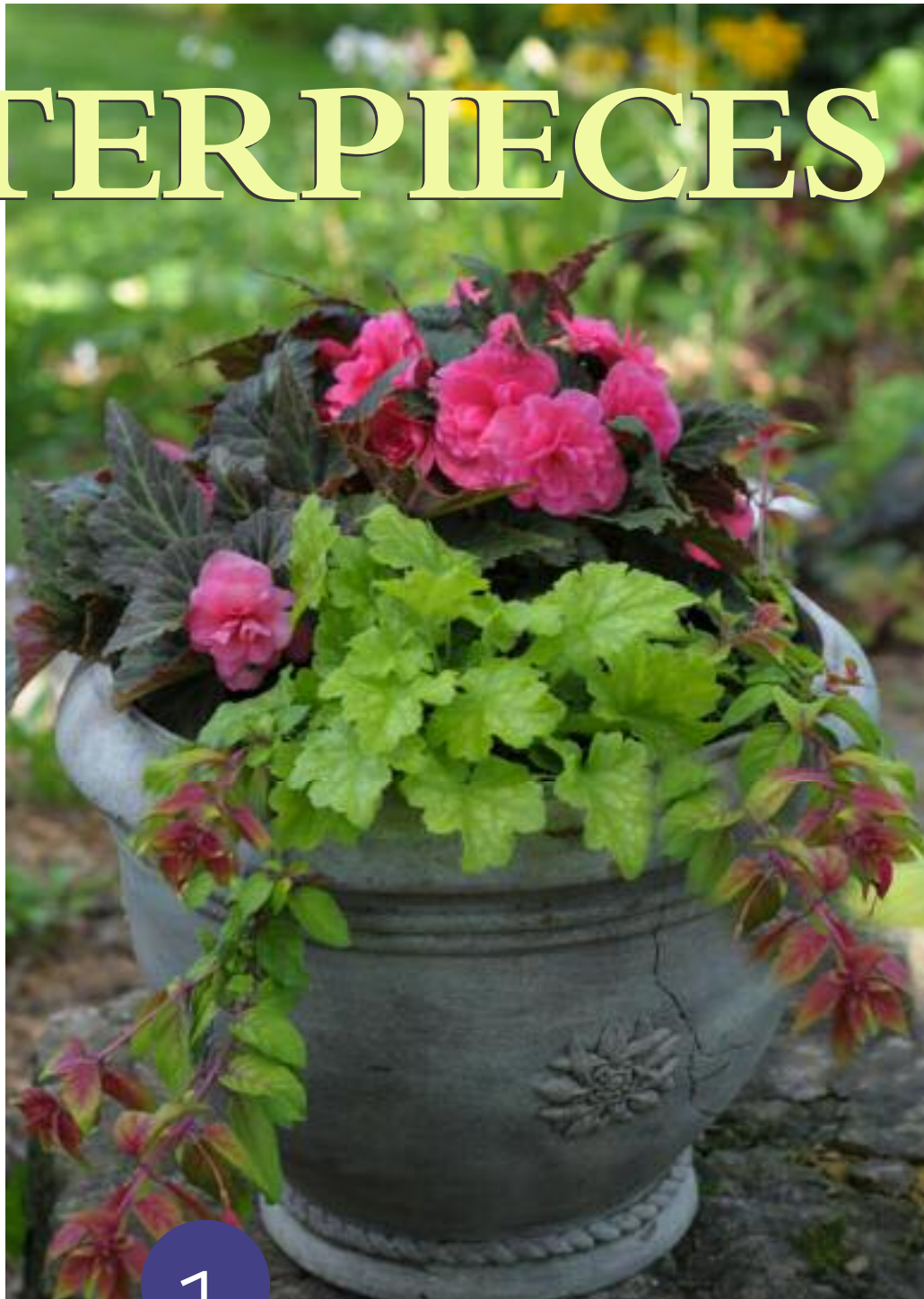
Try these colorful container ideas to brighten your garden and patio.

Story and photos by  
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**M**y first garden was a container. Back then, I thought a spike, several geraniums, and trailing vinca vine was a masterpiece in a pot. After a couple of years, when most of my neighbors' containers had the same look, the creative side of my brain was ready to move on to new container designs. As I browsed the garden center for something less ordinary, I found an entire section devoted to new and unusual annuals—single plants in 4-inch pots. I have been designing creative containers for more than 10 years with these fantastic performing plants.

When designing a container layout, I select the tallest plant carefully. These dramatic attention-getters will surely catch the viewer's eye. Some of my favorites include canna lilies, colorful grasses, and tropical elephant ears. Excellent trailing plants include miniature petunias, sweet potato vines, and anything that will contrast with the container color. Other favorites include perennials sold at the annual price, succulents that can be combined with water-hungry plants, and the gorgeous, sun-loving coleus. Consciously selecting plants and a location with the proper light will result in a stunning display that brings rave reviews.

With those suggestions in mind, here are 10 eye-catching containers to inspire your masterpieces next spring.



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## Citrus Contrasts [Part Sun]

A tall filler plant isn't always necessary in a container. I like the mounded habits of this container and container eight (Quiet Beauty). The huge and numerous blossoms of 'Non-Stop Mocca Pink Shades' tuberous begonia make it a must-have. I design at least one container using this plant every year. The coffee-colored foliage provides a nice contrast with the *Heuchera* 'Dolce Key Lime Pie', another perennial I use every year. The trailer is *Fuchsia hybrida* 'Autumnale'. It doesn't matter if the reddish-purple flowers are not in bloom since they take a back seat to the glamorous foliage.



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### Longtime Favorite [Sun]

Because of the many compliments it inspires, this container combination reappears year after year. *Pennisetum setaceum* 'Rubrum' stays in the background during the early spring and summer months, but it takes off in midsummer with an explosion of purple plumes. Since it's hardy to 20 degrees F, I can keep it in the pot well past Halloween. *Ipomoea batatas* 'Sweet Caroline Purple' nicely accents the grass. But the champion in the pot is chartreuse-leaved *Pelargonium* 'Indian Dunes'. This handsome plant boasts leaves marked with reddish-brown spots and contrasting deep red-orange flowers.

### Singing Blues [Sun]

I'm a fan of color-coordinating flowers and pot, and annual *Lobelia* 'Regatta Midnight Blue' is an attractive match to the earthenware pot. Beside the *Lobelia* rests *Salvia argentea* silver sage. The thick, fuzzy leaves make a dramatic container accent. And the chartreuse-yellow foliage of *Sedum reflexum* 'Angelina' PPAF forms a nice filler and trailer. Both the salvia and sedum are perennials.



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### Tropical Fun [Sun]

Here's another design with a tropical feel. 'Richard Wallace' canna towers over the in-ground container, with mid- to late-summer blooms. It's beautiful surrounded by *Solenostemon scutellarioides* 'Dipt in Wine', with its explosion of yellow, green, and maroon colors. The prolific bloomer *Argyranthemum frutescens* 'Butterfly' boasts bright yellow blooms. Cascading down the pot is the super-compact *Calibrachoa* 'Cabaret Yellow'.



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## High Drama [Shade]

There's nothing I like better than the huge, tropical leaves of *Colocasia esculenta* 'Malanga'. Also known as elephant ears, these plants love containers with extra moisture and fertilizer. Combine them with the stunning, multicolored foliage of *Solenostemon scutellarioides* 'Roaring Fire' and 'Red Tango' rex begonia. Both are showstoppers in the shade with their brilliant red hues.



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## Opposites Attract [Sun]

You can combine plants that like dry and moist conditions. Succulents prefer dry conditions but will handle extra water during the growing season. Thick-leaved *Agave parryi truncata* 'Retro Choke' is a dainty edger plant that gets several inches taller by the end of the season. Another succulent, *Aeonium* 'Garnet', is supported by a thick stem and boasts many burgundy leaves with a lime center. *Lysimachia* 'Variegata' fills in the container edge and center while slightly cascading down the edge. For an unusual bluish-green grass, *Juncus* 'Twisted Arrows' is unique and sure to attract attention. For some flower color, *Argyranthemum frutescens* 'Madeira Red' is a favorite with its many shades of red and pink depending on the maturity of the flower.



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### Autumn Mood [Sun]

By late summer, the graceful plumes of purple fountain grass will take over this container, but in early summer, they fit right in. The 3-foot-tall *Acalypha wilkesiana* 'Copperleaf' with its fall tones is a perfect pairing with most warm-colored coleus. This year, I combined it with 'Emotions Inspired', with its crimson-red leaves with lime edging. The nicely spreading *Hedera helix* 'Glacier', a perennial in USDA Zone 5, pleasantly contrasts with *Calibrachoa* hybrid Superbells® 'Red'. Another contrasting plant, *Oxalis vulcanicola* 'Zinfandel Oxalis', exaggerates the lemon-yellow flowers against the burgundy-black leaves.

### Quiet Beauty [Sun]

Elegant is how I describe *Euphorbia* 'Diamond Frost'. With beautiful mounds of continuously blooming white flowers that never need deadheading, *Euphorbia* combines beautifully with brightly colored plants. Two miniature petunias, Superbells® 'Dreamsicle' and million bells 'Terra Cotta', provide the necessary contrast, allowing the *Euphorbia* to stand out.

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## Container Care for BEST PERFORMANCE

1 When it comes to containers, bigger is better, especially in full sun. Select the largest pot your garden or patio space will hold. Make sure there's a hole in the bottom for drainage.

1 Replace the soil every year. Buy lightweight potting soil in bags, and don't use topsoil or soil from the garden.

1 Buy the right plants. The 4-inch potted plants have been tested specifically for container gardening.

1 Water as soon as the soil dries out. Never allow plants to droop.

1 Fertilize plants weekly with a water-soluble mix. Use an all-purpose fertilizer in powder form, mix it with water, and pour it onto plants and soil.

1 Deadhead as often as needed, removing the dead flower and stem.

1 Prune plants regularly, especially those that take over a container and cover up others. Petunias and sweet potato vines, for example, need several "haircuts" throughout the growing season. This helps induce more branching and fresh growth.

1 When a plant dies, remove it and replace it with another plant, let the surrounding plants fill in the space, or, in late summer, add a small pumpkin.

1 Dig perennials out of the container and plant in the garden for the following year.

—M.M.R.

## Potting Masterpieces



### Spring Container Class

For many more container designs, enroll in Michelle Mero Riedel's spring class at MSHS on Tuesday, April 5, 2011. Class details will appear in the March/April issue of *Northern Gardener*. Michelle is a photographer and Master Gardener, who also teaches the popular MSHS class on winter sowing.

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### Orange Explosion [Part Sun]

*Solenostemon scutellarioides* 'Sedona' packs a lot of unusual russet color. A favorite of mine, this coleus is absolutely stunning in late summer and early fall. Seated in the middle of the pot is *Pennisetum glaucum* 'Jade Princess'. A new introduction with a stocky habit and silky burgundy plumes, it gets a little taller as the season progresses. The chartreuse foliage of 'Jade Princess' blends in with *Ipomoea batatas* 'Sweet Caroline Sweet Heart Light Green'. The trailer for this combination is *Calibrachoa* 'Cabaret Peach'.

### Christmas in July [Part Sun]

For a Christmas theme in the middle of summer, this container combination gets enthusiastic reviews. Purple-leaved 'Fireworks' fountain grass stands tall in the back of the planter with beautiful red foliage and stripes of white, pink, green, and burgundy. 'Boxwood' blue eucalyptus contrasts tastefully in front of the grass and gives it a wild touch. Several trailing plants line the edges. Creeping wire vine (*Muehlenbeckia axillaris*) adds an unusual touch with its wiry stems and small, dark-green rounded leaves. A personal favorite, perennial *Lysimachia nummularia* 'Goldilocks' will eventually trail to the bottom of the pot. For added dark contrast, 'Blackie' sweet potato vine will also trail to the bottom and fill in around the edges. Another perennial, 'Tiny Nanny' Asiatic lily, adds the white contrast needed in this combination. *Celosia* 'Fresh Look Red', *Solenostemon scutellarioides* 'Redhead', and a bright red begonia provide an abundance of summer color to fill in the center. □

Master Gardener and professional photographer Michelle Mero Riedel gardens in Washington County. She teaches the popular MSHS class on winter sowing.

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