

variety information

profitable container gardening

Retailers aren't the only ones developing creative container gardens. Growers have joined in on the fun with some exciting combinations. (Photo: Kerstin Ouellet)

Growers are finding creative — and profitable — ways to make their own container gardens instead of counting on retailers to do it for them.

By Kerstin Ouellet



Alcalypha 'Louisiana Red', Euphorbia martinii, Helichrysum petiolare minus, coleus 'Garnet Robe', Pilea glauca, alternanthera 'Purple Knight' and duranta e. 'White Variegated'. (Photos: Baker's Acres)



Ornamental pepper 'Black Pearl', calibrachoa 'MiniFamous Dark Pink with Eye', scaevola 'Brilliant', lantana 'Athens Rose', pentas 'Cranberry Punch', bacopa 'Taifun Blue Dream', Setaria palmifolia rugra variegata and coprosma 'Coppershine'.

What some thought 10 years ago would be a trend that would eventually fade away has instead established itself as a new form of gardening, undoubtedly claiming its permanent spot in horticulture: container gardening. What started with hanging basket combinations in green or white plastic pots has evolved into an art form, sporting the most imaginative and intricate designs, both in plant combinations as well as the type of containers used. There is no question that suppliers — both green and hard goods — have equally responded to the popularity of container gardening, and as a result, the quantity and variety of suitable plants and attractive containers has increased significantly throughout the years.

Gone are the days when container gardens were merely a random combination of leftover plants in one pot. With their imagination and expectations fed by gardening and lifestyle magazines, TV shows and books, today's consumers are looking for more intricate designs and ways to complement their decor, satisfy personal tastes and sport unique designs. But since creativity can be nurtured but not acquired, growers may struggle to come up with designs that live up to their customers' expectations. Fortunately for some, young plant suppliers and breeders often provide "recipes" on how to use their plants in container gardens. Those recipes can easily be copied to create the desired design. But what if a grower doesn't want to grow all of the plants

featured in the designs? Or what if some plants simply don't do well in a particular climate? Those are some of the reasons why several growers strictly do their own designs, and they are remarkably successful — and profitable — with that approach.

Where To Begin

Lisa King, co-owner of Forest Lake Greenhouses & Garden Center, Florence, S.C., does her own designs to create container gardens that do well in her particular climate. "I look at supplier-provided recipes for ideas and inspiration, but it's important that we only use plants that are well-adapted to our climate; therefore, we create our own designs," King explained.

Nancy Baker, co-owner of Baker's Acres, Alexandria, Ohio, grows many varieties, so she has lots of unusual plants to use in her designs. She enjoys it when her customers love a design and ask about a plant they're not familiar with. Baker's own creativity and that of some of her employees lets them create artistic and unusual designs.

Baker's Acres' approach to planning its container gardening program is anything but random. They start by evaluating the past year to determine what sold and performed well and what didn't. Baker's tracks customer comments throughout the year and employees listen to their ideas about possible combos. Finally, the grower looks at what the color trends are for the coming season and takes them into consideration. ▶



Energy efficient glazing with high clarity and maximum impact resistance.



U can reduce your energy bill.

Do you realize how much "U" can affect your bottom line? U-factor is an internationally recognized measure of a building material's insulating capacity. A lower number indicates better insulation.

With a U-factor of just .50, ThemaGlas™ 8mm triple-wall polycarbonate is as much as 60% more energy efficient than glass and other single layer greenhouse coverings.

Compared to 8mm acrylic twin-wall, ThemaGlas triple-wall is 25% more energy efficient, in addition to being less costly on an installed basis.

ThermaGlas offers excellent light transmission, maximum impact protection, and non-yellowing performance that's guaranteed for 10 years*.

Call for more info, or visit www.ThemaGlas.com/U-Save.

Available through the finest commercial greenhouse manufactures and supply distributors.



PALRAM AMERICAS
HORTICULTURAL PRODUCTS

9735 Commerce Circle • Kutztown, PA • 19530
(800) 999-9459 • Fax: (610) 285-2859

© 2005 Palram. ThemaGlas is a trademarks of Palram. TG_Energy_Ad_v1.0
*Warranty details available upon request.

Write in 402

variety information



Coleus 'Florida Sunshine', cuphea 'David Verity', plectranthus 'Ochre Flame' and calibrachoa Million Bells.



Coleus 'Lava Nagila', penstemon 'Liliput Rose', verbena 'Superbena Burgundy' and Pseuderanthemum sinuatum.



Coleus 'Tiger Lily', coleus Tell Tale Heart', Duranta repens 'Gold Edge' and laurentia 'Beth's Blue'.

At this point it's time to get to the drawing board, where the total number of combos is broken down into percentages by color group (bright, pastel and mono designs) and light exposure (sun, partial sun and shade). "I find that a partially sunny spot is most commonly available," explained Baker. Because of this, she designs 60 percent of her creations for partial sun.

Forest Lake Greenhouses also considers the light levels that the finished container will be exposed to when designing combination planters and whether the containers are intended for indoor or outdoor use. Employees then pick three major plants, following the basic rule that one should be upright, one trailing and one filler. Once those three focal points are picked, the remaining plants are selected. For example, King mentioned one of her recent designs that used a bromeliad as the upright component, an English ivy as the trailing plant and a croton as filler.

Customization Is Key

King attributes part of the success to the large amount of custom work her greenhouse does. Customers have the opportunity to bring in their own pots or pick one out at the store, and King and her staff will custom-plant it for them. "Custom-created work is an important part for us," King explained. "We're known for our containers because of our custom work. We even go to people's homes to custom-plant large containers for them on-site."

Forest Lake Greenhouse designates one employee to only do on-site custom-designs for people at their homes or businesses and one employee who spends her time exclusively creating container gardens at the nursery. "Our employees deserve a lot of credit for our success," described King. "We have some very creative people on our staff, and we couldn't do this many designs without them."

King and her husband, Tim, employ a staff of 15 year-round employees and 22 during peak season. Together they create thousands of container gardens year round. The on-site planting alone accounts for several hundred containers, with some customers requesting to have only two planted near their front entrances, while others have 10 or more throughout their gardens and patios.

Creativity Counts

Asked about her recipe for success, Baker said her company's designs are "...alive, artistic and unusual. I know this a very labor-intensive job from the planning to the planting to the growing. We won't get rich doing this, but it's rewarding. Gardeners want new, exciting, creative, but not harder. There is so much great stuff out there. Stop feeding your customers meat and potatoes only. Some want gourmet foods and will pay for it."

Baker's Acres sells about 3,200 containers in a variety of sizes and styles. Baker's container

choices are varied and many, from moss and 12-inch plastic baskets to 12- and 14-inch plastic terra cotta pots, wicker, decorative pots, and one-of-a-kind thrift store and antique items. Baker's also creates designs specifically intended as Mother's Day gifts, as well as spring blooming pots and a few fall combos.

Baker's Acres sells to a customer base that includes local homeowners with average income levels, high-income households that spend a considerable amount of money on decorating their yards and plant enthusiasts. "In planning, I remember all these customers so everybody can find something in their price range and desires," Baker said.

Adapting To Your Customers

Forest Lake Greenhouses also caters to a very wide range of income levels. While a lot of the custom-designed work is done for higher-income households, the customers that visit the garden center come from many different income ranges. "We offer container gardens ranging from \$12.99 to \$129.99, so no matter who comes to our store, they are likely to find something within their budget and to their liking," King explained. "A lot of our customers are working women over 35, but certainly not exclusive." In addition to retail sales, Forest Lake Greenhouses produces mixed hanging baskets for the wholesale business.

Forest Lake Greenhouses also produces container gardens year round and adapts its plant



Coleus 'Brookly Horror', Tradescantia pallida 'Biltmore Bimbo', tornia 'Catalina Pink' and Peristrophe hyssopifolia.



Coleus 'Fishnet Stocking', heliotrope 'Fragrant Delight', scaevola 'Whirlwind White' and Hemigraphis alternata exotica.



Philodendron 'Moonlight', impatiens 'Super Elfin Orange' and Cyanotis kewensis.

selections to the different seasons. The grower use plants that thrive in cooler and moderate temperatures in spring and fall, as well as heat- and humidity-tolerant varieties in summer. In winter, mostly cool-season annuals are used, which are dressed up for holiday sales with Christmas accessories, including fresh or silk evergreens, holly and berries.

Asked about their production methods, both Baker's Acres and Forest Lake Greenhouses use the two practices known as "plant-and-grow" and "grow-and-plant." Tim King, who is in charge of production, plants the mixed combos that are produced in the nursery either from plugs/liners or from 4-inch pots, depending on the crops, the time available and the space on hand in the nursery. All of the custom designs are planted from 4- to 6-inch pots, 3 gal. pots and, occasionally, even larger plants, depending on the project.

Baker uses the plant-and-grow method for designs where she wants to achieve an informal look and the grow-and-plant method for the formal or striking designs. She points out how important it is to match the water and light requirements of the different plants, especially when using the plant-and-grow method.

Understanding The Materials

Baker and King share more than just a skilled eye for the right container garden designs; they are also both very passionate about plants and gardening. When asked about some of their favorite plants to use, both quickly produced a long list. Both share a knack for the unusual but also always consider what does well for their customers. King shares her passion with local garden clubs and other groups during the 10-12 talks that she gives at her nursery every year.

With so much passion and enthusiasm, it's no wonder Baker's Acres and Forest Lake Greenhouses & Garden Center do so well with their container gardens. They have clearly found their niche and an outlet for their creativity.

Container gardening is not a trend; it is here to stay. Those businesses that know how to successfully claim their piece of the pie have a good chance to

prosper with it. Judging by Baker's and King's enthusiasm, container gardening is not only lucrative but fun. Let's hope it's contagious! **GPN**

Kerstin Ouellet is president of Pen & Petal, a marketing communications firm for the green industry. She can be reached at kerstin@penandpetal.com or (760) 451-2385.

LearnMore

For more information related to this article, go to www.gpnmag.com/lm.cfm/gp120605



Quality is Beautiful

Donahue's
Your supplier for:

- 2.5" Clematis Liners
- 3.5" Clematis Liners
- Finished One Gallons

You'll find the most heavily rooted clematis in the business! And one of the most extensive lists of clematis varieties.

For our 2007 Clematis list, contact your favorite broker or contact us directly

Donahue's

Faribault, MN 55021 • Phone 507.334.8404 • Fax 507.334.0485
Or e-mail us at donahue@donahuesclematis.com

Write in 747



Introducing built-in cells for built-in sales.

Our Landscape Market Trays combine a flat and a pack in one super sturdy tray. Great for landscapers or customers who want several plants of one variety, these trays also result in larger sales for garden centers and retailers.

Want to know more? Call us at **800-353-1190**, or visit us on the web at www.eastjordanplastics.com.

EAST JORDAN PLASTICS, INC.
Insight. Integrity. Innovation.

© 2006 East Jordan Plastics, Inc.

Write in 789

Bottom Line...

Save Money!



20' to 30' Wide Frames w/ Gutter
As Low As **\$1.75** / Square Foot

- ⇒ Low Prices
- ⇒ Customized Sizes
- ⇒ Most Orders Ship in 3 Days
- ⇒ In-House Engineering
- ⇒ Financing Available



30' x 96' Cold Frame
\$2,135.00
Ships in 3 Days!



16' x 96' Cold Frame
\$683.00
Ships in 3 Days!



20' x 96' RTM Cold Frame
\$1,383.00
Ships in 3 Days!



Shade Structures, Shade Fabric, Benches, Nursery Carts, Plant Display Centers and much more!

Call for Free Color Catalog
1-800-346-9902

www.atlasgreenhouse.com

Write in 730