

**MERCHANDISING TIP**

If consumers pick up a product, 80% of them will buy it. Create effective and value added displays to catch shoppers attention.

MasterTag PH: 1.800.253.0439 FX: 1.800.828.0003 www.mastertag.com

Merchandising solutions to keep your business growing.

## crop cultivation



# MIXED CONTAINERS

*at Production*

Creating gorgeous mixed containers isn't just for retailers and consumers; your creative expertise can be used as well!

By Jack Williams

**W**e all know that mixed containers are hot at retail right now. So, to keep customers happy, growers need to offer specialty products as part of their mix.

We also know that making up combinations that actually look nice and grow compatibly is not the easiest job in the world. Initially, most greenhouses delegated the job of designing and growing mixed containers to the guidance of the women in the greenhouse who had that "artistic ability" or "good sense of style" and who easily put together containers that were balanced, artistically and functionally. These very capable individuals have held a place of high standing in our operations as a result.

The bad news for growers is that increased demand for these containers is requiring even more people to get involved, many of which are men. And even though men are accused of not seeing purity of color, blending colors well or understanding how subtle textures in foliage and flowers can be used to make great containers, we "guys" are proving ourselves to be quite competent when it comes to creating and growing quality mixed containers.

The good news is there are resources available to guide growers in putting together different combination planters, making the job of designing and presenting mixed combos easier than ever before. Looking through our trade publications, catalogs, consumer gardening publications and the wealth of information available through all the major breeding and distributor companies, there is no lack of recipes, ideas and new twists on how to make good combination pots, baskets, window boxes or other specialty containers. The message, through all these resources, is quite con-

sistent and gives solid, basic outlines of how to design and produce good containers. However, nothing beats good old experience, and taking concepts and putting them into practice will be the best teacher for us all.

### GROW AND PLANT

When starting off, it may be easiest to begin by using 3- to 4-inch prefinished plants that can be combined, provide the desired look and allow the designer the benefit of not having to guess what the mature plants will look like as they are positioned for best effect. This method has been called "grow and plant" by some people and is still the best approach for very large containers or as a way to learn about which plants can be put together effectively. Although this method does require more labor cost with the containers, it has some additional benefits that justify the work and expense as outlined below. By using prefinished plants you can:

- Get a good sense of the number of plants required to make the container full and attractive without over planting. Too often the recipes given from suppliers suggest a generous number of cuttings, which helps fill the container out quickly. As plants mature, weaker species are overwhelmed by adjacent plants, and tight spacing can lead to problems with diseases like Botrytis.

- Get a feel for how plant forms blend together and if these provide a good balance of upright, mounding and trailing so that the container is balanced and will provide an optimum view of flowers and foliage. If this is a basket that will be viewed at eye level, it is not desirable to have plants that will be so tall that their flowers will not be seen. Likewise, if this is a patio pot that will be viewed from above looking down, it is important that it include

*Mixtures of different colors and sizes of brachyscome or coleus can be combined for great results. (All photos courtesy of Jack Williams)*

## crop cultivation

elements that bring the flowers up for easy viewing and not focus too much on trailing plants.

• Get a good feel on how the textures of the foliage and their colors blend and contrast for visual appeal. Foliage texture is often not considered as mixed containers are designed, but it plays an important role in the overall look of the finished plants. Remember that even the best containers will not have all plants in flower at the same time, so foliage will be seen and will play a big role in the look achieved. By mixing fine foliage with thicker, larger leaves, a nice contrast is achieved. It is not desirable to have foliage types that are too similar for all plants in the container, as the look is not exciting nor does it help create an attractive background to the flowers.



*Using prefinished plants allows you to focus on how plant forms blend.*

• Understand which plants are compatible. It is possible to combine some plants that are not as compatible in their production related needs but are compatible with their finished application needs. A good example of this would be plants with different temperature requirements for production such as osteospermum (requires cold) and most other spring items (may or may not tolerate cold growing conditions). By putting the container together at a later stage of development, the osteospermum has had its cold vernalization needs met and can be combined with other warmer-requiring plants as the flowering and finished look is not dependent upon continued exposure to cold temperatures. For these types of mixtures it may be advisable to always plant at a later stage or at the very least, leave room in the container for these plants to be dropped in prior to sale.

### PLANT AND GROW

Once both growers and retailers are happy with a recipe, it is possible to schedule these containers for future years by growing from a rooted cutting stage. This method is referred to as “plant and grow” and represents a lower labor requirement as there is no need to have to handle plants again past the point of transplanting cuttings or final pinching or shaping prior to sale.

Once the production has moved to this direction, there are some additional considerations to keep in mind as the combinations are designed and grown. Can all the plants tolerate similar production temperatures, fertilization needs, PGR requirements, use of Florel (or do some need to be left untreated or unpinched),

light and moisture requirements, and do they have similar pest and disease issues that should be avoided? Although this seems like a lot to keep in mind, these are important cultural-based considerations that influence how successfully the plants can be grown together.

The key word here is “tolerate;” most species can be grown with a level of compromise because their requirements are not so precise that they will not tolerate the needs of other species under the same conditions. Growers can access information about producing the species they are considering for mixed containers and decide to exclude them if they have unique requirements that are not likely to be managed under a multiple plant production schedule. Again, these are the combinations that should be done through transplanting of more mature prefinished plants.

When it comes to the issues of pests and disease sensitivities, it would be advisable to use plants that do not have similar sensitivities. For example, if a plant like a geranium is used that would be sensitive to rust diseases, it would not be advisable to plant it together with items like snapdragons that are also sensitive to this disease. There is no sense in creating an environment that is so favorable to the pest or pathogen that once present it would do significant damage to the entire container.

### ADDING COLOR

When in doubt, use combinations of the same species. Petunias of different colors and flower sizes make great combination baskets. Mixtures of different colors and sizes of brachyscome or coleus can be combined for great results. Any

mixtures in size and form of flowers within a species provide viable combinations with minimal risk. The best thing about using the same species for combinations is having uniform culture for all plants in the pot or basket. This can be a great way to get started, but be sure to pick a species that will give a good show of color and garden performance to maximize consumer satisfaction.

We can't ignore color theory, but by following a few concepts it should be possible to create some beautiful mixtures. It is simple; if the combination is pleasing to you, chances are it will be to someone else too. You don't have to own a color chart to get it right. Fortunately, Mother Nature has some combinations that look great but don't follow any rules! A great way to get started is to create:

**Monochromatic color.** Combinations using plants within the same color category. The different shades of yellow, blue, red, orange or even white result in beautiful pots and baskets that will stand out in any garden. When doing monochromatic combinations pay attention to texture and color of foliage and how this will provide a nice background to the flowers. If doing an all white container, using foliage in the gray and blue color range makes it soothing and cool, while using variegated foliage gives a more vibrant effect.

**Harmonious color.** Combinations using colors that are close to each other on the color wheel. For example, we normally think of lavender, blue and purple as a great harmonious color mixture because it is soft and very cooling to view. But mixtures of red, orange and yellow are also harmonious with a bolder look.

**Contrasting color.** Combinations using colors that are opposite each other on the color wheel. When put together they are bright and catch the eye as appealing and fun. Purple and yellow make a great spring color mixture when combined. Red and green is a wonderful summer color mixture that is easy to do using the outstanding foliage colors available with coleus, ipomea and other summer, heat-loving plants.

Color also does not have to stay the same throughout the season. Like all gardens, mixed containers should evolve and change from one season to the next. It would be great if the plants used were capable of

providing an un-ending show of color from spring to fall. More likely, there will be times that flowering is not possible, and either the foliage should provide a key element to the container (this is especially true for

variegated foliage plants) or the consumer should be comfortable replacing that particular plant with one more appropriate for the season. We have been calling this the "evolving container."

**ADDING VARIETY**

When it comes to flowers be sure to include a mixture of sizes and textures like you would do with the foliage. Combinations with all small flowers may look ▶

1/2 Horizontal

**DEVROOMAN BULB CO.**

Ad #

Write in 745

1/2 Horizontal

**ATTKO GREENHOUSE INC.**

Ad #

Write in 744

## crop cultivation



When doing monochromatic combinations pay attention to texture and color of foliage.

like a Monet painting up close, but the real dramatic results show up when you add large, bodacious flowers that really stand out in the mix. With the heat of summer, most flowers get smaller and the color fades, so big beautiful flowers and buds help keep the container interesting and colorful.

Finally, don't be afraid to mix annuals with perennials, grasses, vines and shrubs or other plants. Some people are purists and feel that these combinations are inappropriate. But with so many incredible plants to choose from today, it would be a shame not to take advantage of the diversity available. Combinations are fantastic because they allow us to take plants that may not be outstanding by themselves, but when combined with other plants and flowers their weaknesses are overcome. If you have a favorite plant with large showy flowers but less than ideal stem strength and growth habit, combine it with plants that provide structure and support to hold it up, and let it show off its flowers. In

this case, the value of each plant is increased as other plants in the combination compensate for characteristics that are not ideal.

As the demand continues to grow for combination planters, guys can hold their heads high and emerge feeling confident and competent in this field of specialty. Besides, when we look closely we can see that Mother Nature has done some pretty crazy things with color and texture, and no one ever accused her of not knowing what she was doing! **GPN**

**Jack Williams is product manager for new products at Ecker Ranch, Encinitas, Calif. He can be reached by phone at (760) 944-4075 or by E-mail at [jwilliams@eckeranch.com](mailto:jwilliams@eckeranch.com).**

### LearnMore

For more information related to this article, go to [www.gpnmag.com/LM.CFM/gp040407](http://www.gpnmag.com/LM.CFM/gp040407)

**INCREASE YOUR PRODUCTION SPACE!**



**Ovaltech 40: when growing gets serious**

40 feet wide greenhouse gives more space for more plants.

More plants attract more customers,

and more customers mean a happier grower.

**HARNWELL**

Call from 1-800-872-6647  
[www.harnwell.com](http://www.harnwell.com)

Write in 728