

# Container Gardening Part 4: Plants

**W**e've talked about container types and materials, we've talked about water movement and watering containers, we've talked about container potting soils. It must be

time to finally talk about the real goal of container gardening, the plants. Remember the successful gardener's mantra, "Right Plant, Right Place, Right Time!" This also applies to container gardening. While an advantage to containers is they can be relocated as needed to provide the plants with the sunlight and space they need, it is also a disadvantage because the plants have a limited defined amount of space for root development, nutrient storage, and water availability.

When speaking of "Right Plant, Right Place, Right Time"

regarding containers, it's important to match container size and shape with the plants that you plan to grow and at the right season. For instance, you can definitely grow kumquats in a container. However, if you try to grow them in a 5 gallon container, you will need to water at least several times per day during the summer, fertilization will require more frequency, the tree will be dwarfed by the root system it can develop, the roots will need regular pruning maybe 1-2 times

per year (this involves removing the tree from the container, pruning the roots, and repotting back into the container), the plant will be unstable and easily blown over with the slightest breeze, and if the

container is short and wide, the kumquat will be pushing itself out of the container.

However, if you choose a 25-gallon container at least 24" deep, irrigation frequency may be only once a week or so, there is a greater capacity for nutrient storage so fertilization frequency is reduced, the plant is stabilized by the size and weight of the container filled with soil and roots, the need for root pruning is greatly reduced if not eliminated, and the tree will grow to a larger more productive size. The main drawback would be that relocating the plant is



Photo by Chris Dupaway

This container features caladium thrillers, coleus fillers with lysimachia (creeping Jenny) spillers.

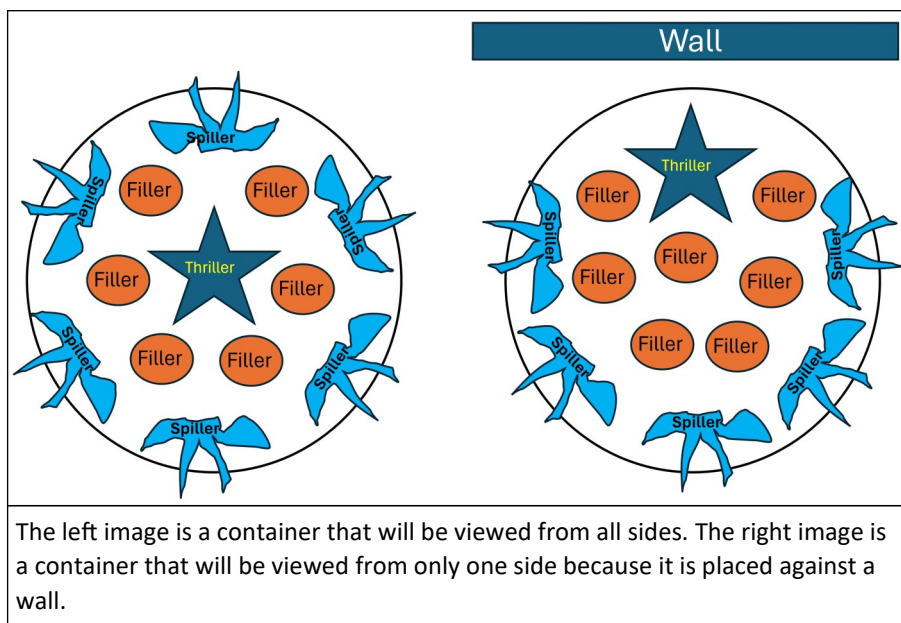
much more laborious. Planting at the "right time" is more important for annual plants and are typically divided into warm and cool season growth.

When making a multi-plant container, try to start with smaller younger plants. This makes the plants easier to plant and place in the container and will allow them to grow and adapt to each other as the season goes on. One popular method of planting a mixed plant container is the Thrillers, Fillers, and

Spillers approach. This design technique utilizes three different types of plants to create well-rounded and attractive containers for and location in the landscape.

### Thriller Plants

- Thrillers are plants with height and bulk that add flair and a vertical element to the container.
- Thrillers can be flowering plants, foliage plants, and ornamental grasses.
- Thrillers are placed in the center if the container will be viewed from multiple sides.
- Thrillers are placed in the back of the container if it will be viewed from only one side.



### Filler Plants

- Fillers tend to be more rounded or mounded lower plants and give the container a full look.
- Fillers are generally placed in front of and/or around the Thriller plant between the Thriller plant and the container edge.

### Spiller Plants

- Then its time to add the Spillers.
- Spillers are plants with a tendency to trail and hang over the container edge.
- Spillers are planted close to the edge of the container so they can spill over.

With this design approach, you can even create attractive edible containers. You can use something like pepper, okra, or eggplant as the thrillers; plants like radishes or carrots as the fillers, and maybe cucumbers, beans, or oregano as the spillers.

Containers can also contain single plants or multiple plants of the same variety. You can then create the eye appeal, lines, and unity by how you arrange the

Some important points to remember about the plants in your containers:

- 1) Containers are great for growing both ornamental and edible plants.
- 2) Try to use similar types of plants in mixed containers – all annuals or all perennials.
- 3) Use plants with similar growth requirements – growing season, light, moisture, fertilizer, and soil conditions.
- 4) Start with smaller young plants if

possible and let them grow into their available space.

- 5) Match container size to root requirements and above ground size of the plants.
- 6) Remember that container size greatly affects “mature” plant size.
- 7) Mixed containers are more interesting if there is also some diversity in texture.
- 8) The container gardens are primarily for your enjoyment so make sure you like the finished product.

Hopefully, this four-part article series will help you to successfully plan, plant and enjoy the wonderful world of container gardens.

~ Dr. Joe Willis

### Selected Resources

Container Gardening Using The Thriller, Filler, Spiller Planting Technique. 2024. [Container Gardening Using The Thriller, Filler, Spiller Planting Technique \(provenwinners.com\)](https://provenwinners.com)

Hentges, C., B. Dunn, K. Layman. 2019. Container Gardening. OSU Extension. [Container Gardening | Oklahoma State University \(okstate.edu\)](https://okstate.edu)



# Just a Few Container Plant Choices

## **Thrillers**

Agave  
Angelonia  
Bamboo  
Banana  
Peppers (hot, sweet or ornamental)  
Caladiums  
Canna  
Celosia  
Coleus  
Corydalis  
Dahlia (upright varieties)  
Dracena  
Elephant ear (taro)  
Fuchsia (upright varieties)  
Hibiscus  
Millet  
Ornamental Grasses  
Papyrus  
Sansevieria (mother-in-law's tongue)  
Tomatoes

## **Fillers**

Argyranthemum (Marguerite daisy)  
Begonia  
Cabbage  
Caladium  
Coleus  
Diascia (twinspur)  
Euphorbia  
Impatiens  
Kale  
Nasturtium (mounding types)  
Nemesia  
Osteospermum (African daisy)

Pelargonium (geranium)  
Petunia  
Salvia (small-flowered types)  
Verbena

## **Spillers**

Callibrachoa  
Dichondra  
Ivy  
Licorice vine  
Lobellia  
Lysimachia (Creeping Jenny)  
Sweet potato vine  
Torenia  
Trailing begonia  
Trailing petunias  
Trailing tomatoes



Trailing tomatoes are fun to grow in containers and hanging baskets.