



New life for summer-weary containers

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Right about now in late August, many of the most plant-smitten people we know look out the window and mutter darkly, "I hate my garden!"

The weeds have grown fiendishly after summer's drenching rains, and are taking over like a hoard of aggressive Huns. Heavy rains have knocked over taller plants like asters and purple coneflower, leaving them splayed ungracefully over their smaller neighbors. Excessive heat has triggered a meltdown of the daisies, phlox and salvia that were so pretty just a few weeks ago.

In short, it all looks bedraggled, spent and weary -- which is about how the gardener feels, too.

Now, while temperatures remain steamy, may not be the time to tackle the whole garden. But do consider giving yourself and your landscape a lift by revamping your containers, hanging baskets and windowboxes, those plantings that tend to be constantly in your face, for good or ill.

Ditch your tired, your poor, your addled petunias, yearning to be compost. Say good-bye to the shriveled begonias the neighbor never watered while you were on vacation. Kiss off the diseased, the bug-ridden, the fading, the dying and start anew. There's still at least two months of growing season ahead, and more choices than ever for fall container color.

We're not just talking mums here, although they remain a reliable standby. What you need is new blood in the form of plants that can take the shorter days and cooler temperatures of early fall, and even stand up to the occasional light frost without slumping into a mass of blackened foliage.

You may already have some annuals that can take a licking and keep on ticking until hard frost: Sweet alyssum, snapdragons, lobelia, marigolds and annual sages are some examples. If these are flagging now, cut them back and fertilize to give them a boost that will prompt a final, glorious round of bloom.

Alert to the gap in the gardening year between summer's glory and the season's true end, growers and garden centers are preparing new stock meant to be planted now. One particularly well-thought-out campaign comes from Proven Winners, a worldwide growers consortium committed to the proposition that better plants make better gardens.

The "Fall Magic" collection, like the plants sold for spring and summer, are vegetatively propagated clones of species bred for vigor, long bloom and disease resistance. You've probably seen these plants at your local garden center, where they are commonly offered in pre-planted containers. They're a little pricey for bedding out in large numbers, but ideal for container culture where what you really need is a small but select group of great performers.

Most of these plants are annuals or tender perennials unlikely to survive the winter here, but standard summer bedding plants also expire with hard frost, so don't let that stop you from enjoying them. Some of the plant

names are a bit of a mouthful for those unused to botanical Latin. Don't be daunted -- step right up and meet some gorgeous specimens that are relatively recent arrivals on the home gardening scene.

There are plants in the daisy family, like *Osteospermum* and *Argythemum*, in many lovely shades of gold and yellow. Long-lasting *Bracteantha* is from the family of strawflowers that you may remember from gardens of your childhood.

Calibrachoa, or "Million Bells," look like miniature petunias, but don't require as much tedious deadheading to keep them blooming. The vivid reds and roses suit fall's stronger palette, but the new 'Terra Cotta,' flowering in subtle golds and muted oranges, works especially well with the subtle colors of ornamental grasses.

Trailing plants like *Calibrachoa* that spill over a container's lip are always charming. Other good fall choices include the chartreuse *Lysimachia* 'Goldilocks' and the sweet little *Nemesias*, which come in an array including white, yellow and blue. *Diascia* or twin-spur is another creeper, favoring the dusky red end of the spectrum.

In plotting your potted combinations, don't neglect handsome foliage, which puts on a show independent of and longer-lasting than flowers.

Look for the new hybrid *Heucheras*, which can have leaves of deep purple, ('Purple Petticoats' or 'Amethyst Mist'), or richly variegated foliage ('Green Spice') Ornamental grasses and sedges look fresh now, and will keep their good looks for weeks to come. "Fall Magic" contenders include variegated sweet flag and graceful sedges with arching, coppery blades.

Surprisingly perhaps, a number of plants in the collection are escapees from the herb garden. Some of my favorites are new and vivid forms of ornamental *salvia*, blending chartreuse and green or white, pink and green on a single leaf. *Lamiastrum*, or dead nettle, is a low-growing creeper with delicately patterned leaves, and *Santolina*, with fine, ferny foliage is the familiar old lavender cotton.

But what, you may wonder, should you do with these new and possibly unfamiliar plants of fall? How can they best be made to play nice together? Not to worry.

The Proven Winners folks and Flower Framers, an Ohio-based window box specialist, are coming to the rescue with "recipes" that will help you cook up a stunning combination of plants. We've duplicated some of them on these pages, but you'll find more, much more, at www.provenwinners.com (click on "Container Recipes") or www.flowerframers.com (click on "Garden Recipes").

To find a local retailer, visit the Proven Winners homepage and click on "Find a Retailer." More than 100 New Jersey garden and home stores carry the brand, so starting with your local outlets may be just as easy.

Another brand of "designer" plants is Simply Beautiful, marketed by the Ball Horticultural Company. This outfit, which brought you the deservedly popular 'Wave' petunias, does not have a full line specifically for fall, but does have some cool-season plants including the 'Showmaker' collection of mums. The company's Web site, www.simplybeautifulgardens.com, will also direct you to nearby retailers.

Rev up your spirits and expand your horizons as you roam the garden centers in search of a second wind for your containers.

Chrysanthemums now are available in early, mid-season and late varieties that can carry a patio container garden from mid September through early November. Keep them adequately watered (they hate to dry out) and get them out of the pots and into the ground by mid November; it's not a sure thing, but some may live to bloom another season.

Asters with their starry-eyed blossoms are another fall favorite. Not only do they come in true blues and vivid shades of pink, ruby and magenta, but their flowers are extremely attractive to bees, butterflies and hummingbirds. The plants are also, alas, extremely attractive to bunnies, although careful placement of

containers may thwart them. If you want to see them rise again next spring, you may have to plant them out in late fall behind fencing, as I do.

Ornamental grasses on the whole make lovely subjects for larger pots. Many have attractive flower plumes, but the key feature is finely divided foliage that catches every breeze. Some are hardy and worth overwintering in the ground; some are annuals that won't survive freezing temperatures. Check the tag and ask the staff.

As they fade from green to russet and golden brown, grasses are especially effective when backlit by the sun. Try fooling with the placement of your containers to light them up with long, lambent rays of the rising or setting sun.

While we're talking grasses, let's not forget bamboo, a giant form of grass. Many types are not only hardy in our zone, but evergreen. Growing bamboo in containers circumvents the danger of rhizomes romping away through the soil and threatening to spread through your neighborhood.

Among fall-blooming perennials that can spend time in pots are goldenrods, which are NOT the cause of autumn hay fever (blame ragweed, an innocuous, wind-pollinated weed). New hybrids are gorgeous fountains of gold. Look for 'Fireworks' or the dwarf 'Golden Fleece.'

Plants with succulent leaves defy desiccation and this group includes many fall stars. Sedums including the ever-popular 'Autumn Joy' have flowers that ripen into russet reds, then fade to an attractive brown. Montauk daisies grow nearly to the size of a shrub, and produce pristine white Shasta-style daisies from mid October through November. Sword-leafed plants like agave, yucca and the tender New Zealand flax (Phormium) are downright sculptural, and make dramatic accents next to a stair or at the end of a path.

Two plants that go the distance until hard frost and beyond are ornamental kale, an inedible member of the cabbage family that has boldly colored leaves, and the new two-season pansies and violas that bloom in fall and survive to flower again next spring. (The 'Polar' series of pansies are available through Lowes outlets).

Finally, for impact that lasts and lasts, consider some of the dwarf conifers for large pots. Available not just in green, but in silvery-blues, golds, and variegated combinations, petite little evergreens have substance, as well as style. With protection, they can overwinter in their pots, or be planted in the ground in late November.

If you would like winter color without having to fret about the plants' survivability, consider another tactic for container magic in the post-Thanksgiving period.

Empty your containers or window boxes and fill them with crumpled chicken wire. Using this as you would a floral frog to hold stems, dress the containers with cut evergreens, and berried stems. Spray them with Wilt Pruf or a similar anti-desiccant, and you should get many weeks' life out of them before they brown and die.

By then, you'll be mooning over the new crop of garden catalogs, planning for the coming spring. By then, it won't be long before you drag out the containers and start the creative cycle all over again.

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