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Refresh those pots and planters for a new season

By Maureen FitzPatrick
Special Correspondent

September is a month of comings and goings in the garden. There's the harvest, of course, that's leaving, and the bulbs, perennials, shrubs and trees that should be going in.

Then there are the pots and containers that fall somewhere in between. Many of their frost-sensitive annuals have given their all and are about ready to come out, but with two to three months of growing time left, who wants to put away the pots and empty the window boxes? Fortunately, growers have anticipated the need and are providing retailers with collections of plants that will put on a strong show beyond Thanksgiving, flowering until heavy frosts.

Asters, chrysanthemums and the decorative kales have been the lead actors of the fall garden, and easy to plop into doorside containers. But now you can augment those predictables with the daisy-flowered osteospermum (which offers nice waxy green leaves), some spikey-flowered salvias like "Purpurescens," the short, trailing snapdragons and monkey-faced nemesias. Proven Winners R Fall Magic collection includes Carex flagellifera "Toffee Twist," one of the handsome grasses you might add for texture and height. Its heder helix "Goldstern," a variegated ivy, adds both pizzazz and "drape" to soften a container or windowbox. Since coleus, those gorgeously colored annuals grown for their foliage, will give up the ghost with the first chilly nights, think about replacing them with heucheras, commonly known as coral bells, for fall foliage interest. With their mottled leaves in wines and silvered burgundies, they are one of my favorite perennial foliage choices.

Another foliage interest you might add is a furry-leaved helichrysum like "Icicles" or the foot tall, cut-leaved soft gray centaurea cineraria "Colchester White." These latter often winter over for me when planted directly in the garden. And speaking of icicles, the Icicle pansies, developed with hardiness in mind, come in deep, autumn shades of reds and oranges, purples, blues and whites, both solids and bi-colors. These are incredibly hardy little bloomers and planted in fall will flower, take a rest when hard frost arrives, then gear up for rebloom in early spring. I've had them bloom right through a dusting of snow;

just make sure you've provided good drainage over the coldest months. Still another plant that lasts into the winter is the bronze leafed millet. These are bigger plants -- to 4 feet, with cattail-like fluoreescenses. Last fall I planted them in pots with red cabbages, kale and orange pansies and had to evict them for Christmas.

Like any other plants, these fall retainers will need to be fed and watered. Cooler temperatures and fall precipitation usually make this an easy task, but you're still on duty if the weather turns hot and dry. For those of you who find window box maintenance less than a delight, check out Flower Framers window boxes, which come in 2- to 15-foot lengths, and have a built in drainage system. The Web site, www.flowerframers.com or (800) 315-1805 also offers self-watering drip irrigation systems that can service both upper and lower windows on a house and are virtually invisible. It's a good idea to refresh (no need to replace) the soil when you replant pots and boxes.

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A reader asks about bringing plants indoors, which we'll all be doing relatively soon, and dealing with resulting insect problems. First of all, you should repot any plants that have outgrown their pots before you bring them indoors. For those that will remain as is, scrub their pots, check leaf axils and stems, undersides of leaves for eggs/pests and flush soil with Ced-o-flora or another type of soil drench. With smaller pots, I cover the soil with plastic and then swish the leaves through soapy water to rid them of tiny pests. Rinse to remove soap residue. For large plants, place in a plastic bag and spray with an insecticide; leave bag sealed for several hours. Most plants coming indoors will want a sunny window for winter quarters; also, most houseplants like a rest over the winter so cut back on fertilizers, unless growing instructions direct otherwise.

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Coming up

* Lisa Beebe's Basic Horticulture class, a 12-week course including all facets of basic horticulture, will meet two Thursdays a month from October-May, 10 a.m.-1 p.m. at the Garden Education Center of Greenwich greenhouse on Bible Street, Cos Cob. To register, call 869-9242, ext. 13.

* Tuesday at 6 p.m., is the annual dahlia meeting and contest of Westchester Fairfield Horticultural Society. (www.westfairhort.org). Meet at the garden of Penney Burnett, 2285 Shippan Ave, Stamford. Rain or shine. 874-4752 for details.

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