

Contain Your Native Plants!

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Container gardening continues in popularity with no limit to creativity. I see gorgeous containers overflowing with combinations of plants that offer not only floral color but also striking groups of plants with complimentary foliage. What is missing from the container plant palette is an array of our beautiful, hardy native plants.

Many native plants, often referred to as wildflowers, are anything but “wild” and adapt well to many garden styles. In Shaw Nature Reserve’s Whitmire Wildflower Garden is an expanding collection of attractive container gardens that illustrate for gardeners



how to use native plants to create their own potted garden. A visit is sure to offer many ideas for the avid gardener.

Anything that holds soil can be used as a container. Ceramic pots come in a vast offering of colors and sizes. Add color to your garden not only with flowers but with glazed pottery as well. Don’t overlook the simplicity of found objects such as an old boot, antique bucket or even a hollow log! Be sure there is ample drainage unless you are planning a container water garden.

For the containers for the Whitmire Wildflower Garden, I use a potting soil that is blended with 25% to 40% Turface. Turface is a high-fired clay that helps to retain moisture without reducing drainage, prevents compaction, provides more porosity and reduces leaching of nutrients from the soil.

For plants that grow well in a more organic soil, such as most woodland plants, use the lower percent of Turface. A slow-release fertilizer or compost can be added can be mixed in with the soil to provide fertility. This mix works well for most of the

containers unless plants with special requirements are used. An example of this would be the trough garden planted with glade plants pictured here (shown are Missouri evening primrose, New Jersey tea and *Sedum pulchellum*). The soil mix is sandy topsoil mixed with limestone gravel to emulate the thin rocky topsoil of a limestone glade.

Success will be ensured by selecting plants with similar cultural requirements and matching those to the ultimate location of the container. The next consideration is to determine how to arrange the plants in appealing groups. Because the plants are not always in bloom, it is the combination of form and texture that provides the most long-term interest. Think contrast! Flowers are just the icing on the cake. Contrast fine textured plants such as sedges (*Carex sp.*), grasses or willow-leaved sunflower with those having larger, round leaves. Contrast plants that are quite vertical with mounding plants. When the plants are in bloom, provide contrast with diversity of flower type such as daisy types like *Rudbeckia* or *Echinacea* with the tall spikes of blazing star (*Liatris*).

A typical design is to place a tall, vertical accent plant in the center with a combination of mounding plants around it. Along the outer edge of the container, place plants that spill over or trail. For a sunny location try prairie dock (*Silphium terebinthinaceum*) as the central plant, prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus*) and blue waxweed (*Cuphea viscosissima*) as the mounding plants with an outer planting of rose verbena (*Glandularia*) and purple poppy mallow (*Callirhoe involucrata*). Another choice is *Hibiscus* as the central plant with an alternating planting of little bluestem (*Schizachyrium*) and laceleaf coreopsis (*Coreopsis lanceolata*) surrounding it. Is your location more shaded? A stunning planting can be made with Ostrich fern (*Matteucia*), coral bells (*Heuchera villosa*), Jacob's ladder (*Polemonium*) and sedges (ie *Carex albicans*). The choices for combinations are endless!

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