



MARK BARTOS AND LILLIAN MONTALVO, BEM DESIGN GROUP (detail, opposite page, top left)



MARY EFFRON, MARY EFFRON LANDSCAPE DESIGN (detail, this page, bottom left)

Going to Pot

Design Experts Weigh In on Container Planting for the Space-Deprived Garden

by Susan Heeger + photographed by Lisa Romerein

If you long to garden but lack the ground, why not put it in a pot? Throw together plants you like—and that like the same conditions—and let them duke it out for a season. It's not expensive: The main cost will be your pot. And you don't have to be an expert, just observant, and ready with food, water and clippers to nip off blooms when they're spent. Over time, your container will become a charmer, rewarding you with the bang of something bigger.

But such pots aren't only for the plot-deprived. One, or many, will cool the banks of a swimming pool, soften a stone terrace, create a focal point for a path. Set a boxy one beneath a window. Put another in to plug a hole in your perennial bed. A garden-in-a-pot can play a starring role or a walk-on part.

Just to show off the pot's potential, we asked a few designers to dress a favorite vessel with their pick of plants.

"Start big" is Santa Monica designer Mary Effron's approach when she plans a container, which she envisions as a living bouquet. Here she filled an extra-large concrete trough, drilled for drainage and picked several shade plants chosen mainly for their leaves. The variegated ficus at its heart was her beginning. When she spied it in a nursery, its pink veins led to other choices such as pink-flowering fuchsia and crown of thorns. For balance, she found a variegated ivy that trails off one corner of the box. She then packed the gaps with large and fine-leaved greens such as hostas, baby's tears and African boxwood.

"I love playing with all the textures," she says, adding that in a highly varied mix you don't really need blooms. In fact, the pot will look good longer if you skip them. But either way, she says, "I never see pots as a total commitment. Because they're temporary, you can move plants in and out of them, or relocate the pots themselves and replant."

For her window box, she used a soil blend of 70% commercial potting mix and 30% cactus mix to boost drainage, and enriched it with organic compost and blood-and-bonemeal fertilizer. In summer heat, she'll water every other day and feed monthly with liquid plant food. At cooler times, when growth slows, both water and food can be reduced. "The key is



SASHA TARNAPOLSKY AND JOHN JENNINGS, DRY DESIGN (detail, this page, top left)

to watch for wilt," she warns. "Don't let the soil dry out." And don't be afraid to trim or yank a rampant grower.

Though plants tend to stay smaller in containers, some will rise up and flood the pot, edging out competitors. Effron adds, "You've got a community going here. You can't let one member play the dictator."

For Mark Bartos of BEM Design Group in South Pasadena, the challenge wasn't what to plant but how to whittle down the list. A self-described "plant maniac," Bartos sees containers as a way of having "more, more, more" and showing it off with panache. Using a 32-inch-tall, glazed Chinese pot big enough for an army of plants, he and partner Lillian Montalvo chose a sun-loving group in chartreuse and variegated colors. Ideal for the urban court outside their office, the plantings include a small citrus tree, dwarf nandina and boronia, ethereal sprays of asparagus ferns and a lofty stand of kangaroo paws in shades of gold and burnt orange. Orange and mixed greens are two of the themes here—and themes, Bartos says, are a must for pots because they help you make choices.

The container's size, shape, color and finish help too. Bartos suggests dragging the pot through a nursery to see what plants look right while also complementing each other. "Read plant labels, ask questions, make sure you collect things with similar needs for light and water," he advises. "Pick tall, medium and creeping plants to balance your composition. And buy a few of each, not only for the visual impact but because plants die, despite our best efforts."

Like Effron, Montalvo and Bartos emphasized foliage in their design, aiming for a long-lasting array rather than seasonal fluctuation. As elements change, they'll make alterations such as substituting bamboo stakes or a metal obelisk once the bracts of the kangaroo paws die back.

You can also deck out your pot for holidays. "If you throw a white party, add white impatiens," Bartos says. "Find a shrub with red berries for the winter.

It's hard to overdo it. The more you cram in, the better."

Just to emphasize the portability and flexibility of containers, Sasha Tarnapolsky and John Jennings, partners at L.A.-based Dry Design, bought three children's red wagons, spray-painted them silver and drilled them with drainage holes. After loading in potting soil, they planted a portable potager of herbs, lettuce and peppers. They sodded another with Tifgreen bermuda grass to create a miniature lawn-on-wheels and embedded the third with succulents in lava rock for a rolling desert.

"We liked the idea of taking ordinary, low-cost objects and giving them another life," says Tarnapolsky, a landscape architect who is married to Jennings, a designer. "The wagons are light enough to move, they don't take up much room, and you can even wheel them indoors for parties. 'Here, pick your own salad, sit on the grass,'" she says. "And when you have kids, your pots can be toys again," Jennings adds.

Ideal for apartment-dwellers and perfect for beginning gardeners, containers should be practical as well as pretty. "It's so satisfying to grow food," Tarnapolsky says. "With herbs, you don't think in terms of maintenance. You're always nipping them to use. When they fade, it's time for winter lettuce, arugula, beets." She and Jennings also appreciate the drought tolerance of succulents—a good quality in a container plant—and their sculptural leaves, which are especially striking in spare, rather than packed, arrays. The lawn, a fine turf with a tough constitution, will stay green in summer providing it's wheeled into the shade on hot days, and will turn gold when the weather cools.

"The long-term viability of pots is important to me," says Tarnapolsky, describing herself as a lazy gardener with little time to deadhead blooms. "But I can imagine experimenting—filling one wagon with just marigolds or lobelia and clear-cutting if they don't pan out." <