

OVERWHELMED BY MIXED PLANTERS? TRY THESE 10 TIPS FROM PROS

Expert container designers Barbara Wise, Todd Holloway offer help for “I Can Do It!” pots

March 30, 2012 – Many people walk into a garden center with glorious plans for a container garden, only to be completely overwhelmed by rows and rows of plants. So they buy a bunch of varieties they like and cram them in a pot, and are often discouraged when those selections die, grow out of proportion or end up sporting colors that just don't work.

That's why Tesselaar Plants, in its goal of “Making Gardening Easy,” offers these 10 tips and plant-by-number recipes from container design pros Barbara Wise and Todd Holloway.

“Sometimes we need easy – and that's container gardening,” says Wise, author of the new book *Container Gardening For All Seasons* (Cool Springs Press, \$21.99).

“With the use of these basics, you'll gain the ability to create your own dazzling container designs that last the entire season,” says Holloway, owner of Pot Incorporated, an award-winning container and landscaping company in Vancouver, British Columbia.

1. “ECHO” COLORS

“I like to echo colors,” says Wise. This means looking for hues in one plant that can be reflected in another plant used in the same container. For example, she likes pairing *Strobilanthes* ‘Persian Shield’ with *Torenia* ‘Golden Moon’ because the purple throat of the torenia echoes the purple of the strobilanthes.



ECHO COLORS: This container garden by Todd Holloway features echoes of black throughout: (1) Tropicanna® Black cannas, (2) *Colocasia esculenta* ‘Black Magic’, (3) *Aeonium* ‘Zwartkop’, (4) *Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *sullivantii* ‘Goldsturm’, (5) *Plectranthus* ‘Lemon Twist’, (6) *Ipomoea* ‘Sweet Caroline Purple’, (7) *Calibrachoa* ‘Callie Orange’, (8) *Ipomoea* ‘Sweetheart Purple’ and (9) *Coleus* ‘Sky Fire’. (Photo Credit: Todd Holloway www.potinc.ca)

HI-RES IMAGE: [“Echo Colors”](#) (at right)

FACT SHEET: [Tropicanna® Black cannas](#)

2. CONTRAST TEXTURES

Wise and Holloway both recommend mixing different textures. Fine or delicate foliage contrasts nicely with straight, narrow stalks and broad tropical leaves. Similarly, long, skinny, linear leaves or strappy, arch-type forms look great when paired with full, rounded or oval shapes. “I focus on the foliage contrast with one or two complementary flower varieties,” says Holloway.

3. CHOOSE PROVEN, EASY-CARE PLANTS

Especially if your pots can't be placed close to your water source and you're limited on time, says Wise, try to choose plants that aren't as needy. Succulents, of course, require little care, but the same can be said for showy, tropical plants like mandevilla, cannas like Tropicanna and cordylines like Festival Burgundy™. Even roses can be used in containers, says Wise, if they're disease-resistant and drought- and heat-tolerant: “Flower Carpet® roses, for instance, look fabulous trailing over the sides of containers.”

HI-RES IMAGE: [“Easy-Care Plants”](#)

FACT SHEET: [Flower Carpet roses](#)

4. DON'T FORGET THE POT!

Some plants, like Tropicanna cannas, will grow up to six feet high by the end of the season and enlarge their root size so much, they break through the pot. So Wise recommends making sure all the plants you plan to put in one pot will remain in scale and that your pot size is one-half to one-third the size of the tallest plant when mature.



EASY-CARE PLANTS: (Green pot): (1) Flower Carpet roses (Yellow), (2) Ipomoea ‘Sweet Caroline Bronze’ and (3) Calibrachoa ‘Celebration Apricot’. (Yellow pot): (4) Tropicanna cannas (original) and (5) Lysimachia nummularia ‘Aurea’.

In fact, if Holloway had to recommend just one tip for successful containers, it would be to make sure the pot is large enough. “It must have enough volume to accommodate the roots of the plants’ ultimate size,” he explains. At minimum, it must have at least half the volume of the size of the mature plants.

“Your planter must be large enough to accommodate the plants throughout their life in the container,” he explains. “At the very least, your container’s volume should be roughly a third to a half the size of the eventual volume of the mature plants. If your mature plants are expected to grow to 3 feet tall by 3 feet wide, your planter should be no smaller than 1 to 1.5 feet tall by 1 to 1.5 feet wide.”

The look of the pot – its style, material, color and texture – is just as important an element in container design as the plants themselves, adds Holloway.

5. THINK “THRILLER-SPILLER-FILLER”

This tried-and-true design trick is a great way to make sure your container gardens have the right scale, proportions and mix of shapes and textures. “For your ‘thriller,’ try a tall or upright focal point plant such as canna or cordyline,” suggests Wise. “For your filler, you’ll want a plant that’s bushy or fuller – like a daylily or caladium.” The “spiller,” she explains, is any plant that will trail or cascade over the edge of the pot, like petunias or lysimachia (creeping Jenny). “Remember to mix in fine foliage with your big leaves and to add a little repetition or echo of color among the plants. This makes for a more cohesive, unified piece.”

HI-RES IMAGE: [“Thriller-Filler-Spiller”](#)

FACT SHEET: [Bonfire® begonias](#)

6. SAME NEEDS, SAME POT

“Know the difference between full sun, partial shade and full shade, and choose plants with like cultural requirements in one pot,” says Holloway. Or, as Wise, likes to put it: ‘Know who your plants’ friends are.’ This not only ensures healthy plants, but cuts way down on your maintenance routine. “Keeping light exposure in mind while considering plants is extremely important,” says Holloway.

“Knowing whether your plants do best in full sun, part sun, part shade or full shade is a good starting point once you’ve determined the location of where your planter will live. Always make sure all the plants in the pot are tolerant of the light conditions of your location.”

7. CONTAINER CARE 101

Plants in containers have different needs than those in the landscape. Here, Wise and Holloway provide a few basics:



THRILLER-SPILLER-FILLER: Barbara Wise’s Design features: (1) cordyline, (2) Bonfire begonias and (3) Boston fern. (Photo Credit: Barbara Peake Wise)

- **Plant spacing/placement.** Even though Holloway likes cramming in lots of plants, he still encourages planting them a few inches apart to give roots a chance to spread and establish quickly. After filling the container with soil up to a few inches from the top of the pot, he recommends starting your design with large plants and adding smaller ones as you move to the edges of the pot. “Fill with soil as you go, making sure the tops of the roots aren’t covered with more than a half-inch of soil.”

- **Moisture.** Because there’s less soil in containers, they tend to dry out quicker than their counterparts in the ground. So Holloway recommends keeping an eye on when your plants need a drink, especially later in the season, when they’ve grown and gotten bigger. “Allowing your planter to fully dry out one or more times causes considerable stress on the plants, often preventing them from fully recovering or reaching their full potential.” Holloway recommends watering with your sprayer on a gentle shower setting. “You can stop watering when water flows freely out of the bottom of the pot.” Wise suggests keeping pots as close as possible to your water source, to cut down on the water hauling. She also recommends using a potting soil made for containers instead of soil dug up from the ground: “The lighter components of potting soil provide more aeration for roots.” Checking for moisture is easy, she says: “Just stick your finger into the soil, up to your first finger joint – if it feels dry, then water.” On the other hand, you don’t want roots to rot, so make sure there’s a hole at the bottom of the pot for good drainage.



THE BIGGER PICTURE: Todd Holloway’s skyward designs match the narrow vertical arch of this front entryway: (1) dwarf olive bush, (2) Coleus 'Big Red Judy', (3) Diascia 'Apricot Queen' (4) Ipomoea 'Sweet Caroline Bronze' (5) Tropicanna cannas, (6) Coleus 'Royal Glissade', (7) Ipomoea 'Sweet Caroline Sweetheart Red', (8) Ipomoea 'Sweet Caroline Purple', (9) Plectranthus 'Lemon Twist', (10) Coleus 'Skyfire' and (11) Cyperus alternifolius. (Photo Credit: Todd Holloway www.potinc.ca)

- **Feeding.** For easier feeding, Holloway and Wise recommend a slow-release, granular fertilizer. “It doesn't hurt to apply some liquid fertilizer occasionally as the plants grow larger,” notes Holloway, “especially in tightly planted containers, where fertilizer is in high demand.”
- **Keep ‘em in shape.** Holloway and Wise recommend keeping plants under control – bushier and with more blooms – by pinching, pruning and deadheading throughout the season.

8. THINK OF THE BIGGER PICTURE

“The container and the plants must always complement their location,” says Holloway. In her book, Wise even devotes a whole chapter to the concept of “container-scaping,” or using container gardens year ‘round as landscaping supplements, garden focal points or décor accents in your “outdoor room.” You can also treat your containers as constantly evolving props, says Wise, moving them to perhaps cover a hole in the landscape or changing out spent plants as new seasons arrive. “You can create a lush container-scape, maybe even a paved paradise, when you fill it with potted plants,” she says. “The options are endless.”

HI-RES IMAGE: [“The Bigger Picture”](#)

FACT SHEET: [Tropicanna cannas \(original\)](#)

9. ADD SOME ARCHITECTURE

Just as a landscape needs good garden “bones” to give it three-dimensional interest and character, containers can always use a beginning structure or skeleton. So give it to them, says Wise, with manmade materials, trees and shrubs or architectural plants like agapanthus, cordylines, phormiums or succulents. “A pyramidal trellis in the center of the container, for instance, adds height and can showcase stunning annual vines like mandevilla and passion flower.”



ADD SOME ARCHITECTURE: (1) Festival Burgundy cordyline underplanted with (2) white lobelia

A topiary hibiscus is also striking, she adds, especially with a thick grouping of daylilies below. “And I love shrub roses in containers underplanted with Purple Queen setcresia and lantana.”

HI-RES IMAGE: [Festival Burgundy™ cordyline underplanted with white lobelia](#)

FACT SHEET: [Festival Burgundy cordyline](#)

10. CHECK OUT THESE RESOURCES

You’ll find more container gardening inspiration from Wise when her book, *Container Gardening For All Seasons*, hits bookshelves in April 2012. This at-a-glance recipe book of sorts offers 101 full-color photos of container garden designs for all seasons, climates and personal tastes. Each recipe comes with a shopping list, a coded

“plant-a-gram” (showing which plants go where) and a listing of sun preference, pot size and difficulty level. Wise also offers plenty of ideas on her blog, [B Wise Gardening](#).

You can also find stunning container designs on Holloway’s [Pot Incorporated website](#), particularly on the home page’s slideshow or “Gallery.” [Pot Incorporated’s Facebook page](#) is routinely updated with inspirational material as well.

About Tesselaar

Tesselaar Plants searches the world and introduces new plants for the home garden, landscape, home décor and gift markets. Tesselaar Plants undertakes extensive research and development of its varieties and, once selected for introduction, provides marketing and promotional support for its plant brands through its grower and retail network. Tesselaar carefully selects its licensed growers and purposefully keeps its portfolio of plants small by design, resulting in consistently high-quality, dramatic, prolific plants that are also environmentally friendly and exceptionally easy to grow.

The Tesselaar philosophy is to introduce exceptional plants while “making gardening easy” for everyone, and so it makes its products as widely available as possible. Tesselaar believes that the more gardeners there are, the better it is for everyone.

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Media Contact:

Laurie Riedman / Riedman Communications

Phone: (585) 396-3100

Email: laurie@riedmancomm.com