

The Thriller, Filler and the Spiller – how to put together a beautiful garden container, by Jenny Mandt, Owner of Garden Coaching Solutions

I love this quote: “Half the interest of a garden is in the constant exercise of the imagination”. ~Mrs. C. W. Earle. It is also so pertinent to this month’s topic – container gardening. There are many choices you can put into that new, shiny ceramic pot that you just got as a gift or purchased at a store. I heard a great line that works well in container gardening: You need a thriller, a filler and a spiller to really set off your container(s). One container is good but more pots together with these plant elements in them can really make your pots stand out.

Let’s start first with the **Thriller**. This is a small tree, shrub, grass, fern or plant that will grow taller than the rest in the container and be the centerpiece of the pot. It needs to be interesting to look at and make a statement. The location where the pot will be located will determine what plants can go in it. Evergreen ferns and or shrubs like the low Sweet Box make great shade Thrillers. If you would rather not spend as much and change your containers out seasonally, you could purchase annual Coleus or upright Fuchsia plants that will last all summer long and do very well in shade. The sun containers plants can be hard to choose as there are so many choices! Medium tall grasses like Japanese blood grass or Mexican feather grass can be very showy. A more traditional look would be a small conifer tree. Color is something to consider as well with the Thriller. Bright greens, reds, or striped foliage will really draw the eye to the Thriller in any container.

The **Filler** is critical as it gives the container a sense of fullness. It is usually a third less tall than the Thriller. Heuchera, otherwise known as coral bells or smaller Hosta can be nice Filler perennials for shade. You can tuck in a bit of flowering color by adding a Begonia or Impatiens as well. You can always add some salad greens especially colored stemmed chard. For sun, this is where your imagination can go crazy. There are many amazing sun perennials like Blanket flower, Tickseed, or Black eyed Susans (which will flower all summer long), provide amazing color and come back year after year. You could purchase annual sun lovers like shorter Zinnias, Cosmos, Lantana or Verbena. If you have a really hot sunny location, where you would like to put a container, consider Sedum ‘Autumn Joy’ or shorter French or English lavender. They are drought tolerant and can handle the heat (once established).

Lastly, if your container is over 12” high, you really need the Spiller to pull your container together. Periwinkle or Creeping Jenny are perennial trailing plants that do well in shade containers. If you have soil underneath your container and these plants trail onto that soil, these plants can take root where you don’t want them to next year. A very popular shade annual is trailing Lobelia. It comes in white light blue, dark blue and purple. For a sunny location, the annuals are the stars here. Calibrachoa (Million Bells), Petunias, trailing Verbena, Potato Vine can add colorful flowers or foliage to make your container really pop.

Color is an important part of the plant selection as well. Think about what color plants will go in your container. Say you have a cobalt blue pot. Your house is grey with white trim. If you want the container to really stand out, consider putting in plants where the colors will contrast – yellows or bright green or even orange (this year’s “Hot color”). If your taste runs more traditional, think about choosing colors like green, purple, white, or a complimentary blue that goes with your container.

Using these three elements in your containers can really brighten any area. But if this all seems a bit overwhelming and you need some help coming up with plants for your container, this is some of what I do as a Garden Coach. Send me an email (gardencoachingsolutions@gmail.com) or give me a call (206-915-0585) and I can help you create a beautiful container or two to last all summer long.

