

Get the professional look for your flower planters

By ROSE SHILLING
Associated Press

A flower planter or hanging basket bought ready-made at a nursery: lush with showy, vibrant blooms, providing an instant splash for your porch, stoop or deck.

Your DIY flower container: sparse-looking for weeks, with one plant that dies, and scraggly stems, small blooms or yellowing leaves as the season goes on.

Still, many gardeners keep trying.

“The benefits of doing it yourself would be choosing your own color scheme, choosing plants that are going to work best for your area, and getting to see it grow in,” says Jamie Gulley of Gulley Greenhouse in Fort Collins, Colorado.

So how DO you get the look of those perfect, professionally designed planters that you’ve envied at the garden center or on someone else’s front steps? Some tips from the experts:

Stick your fingertip in the soil — yes, really
Gulley relies on this tried-and-true method of testing the dampness of potting mixture about an inch below the surface.

At the height of summer, expect to water containers daily, or even twice a day if it’s dry and sunny. Water less frequently when the weather’s cooler. Consider buying a self-watering product or a basic drip-irrigation system, used commonly in hot climates where plants might not survive a missed watering.

Or try succulents — jade, hens and chicks, agave — that require less water.

Fertilize right
Fertilizer encourages blooms and prevents leggy shoots. But too much of it can burn up plants. And applying liquid versions or organic options like chicken manure or compost every week or two can be difficult to maintain.

Too many people skip fertilizer or don’t use enough, says Gulley Greenhouse owner and head grower Jan Gulley, Jamie’s mother.

“It would be just like being in a prison and somebody just giving you water and no food,” she says.

Slow-dissolving pellets that feed plants for several months are a favorite, but poke holes in the soil to reach the roots, she says.

Fertilizer that comes in potting-mix bags runs out after a few months — or more quickly in high heat, when frequent watering leaches soil nutrients. Start



CONTAINER FLOWERS — This photo provided by Noelle Johnson shows Crown of Thorns (Euphorbia milii), Lady’s Slipper (Pedilanthus macrocarpus), Variegated Elephants Food (Portulacaria afra) and a blue-gray cactus in Rio Verde, Ariz. (Noelle Johnson via AP)

applying additional fertilizer midsummer for spring-potted plants that use these mixtures.

Do a little research
Impulse buys of gorgeous plants are inevitable, but your arrangements will be stronger if you first find some images that inspire you, says horticulturist Noelle Johnson, who runs AZ Plant Lady landscape consulting in Chandler, Ariz.

“When it comes to pots, most people like to do that themselves,” she says. “That’s very personal.”

A nursery worker can look at the image (probably on your phone) and find those plants or ones with the same look or colors.

Some nurseries, including Gulley, offer guides on winning plant combinations by hue or growing condition. Simply pick up the suggested plants and pot them according to the diagrams.

Jan Gulley suggests limiting colors and plant varieties to two or three. If the planter’s too busy, the eye doesn’t know where to focus: “We call them circus pots,” she says.

Pick a planting strategy
One strategy is to pack

the pot for a full look right away, removing plants later to avoid overcrowding or pruning hard around July Fourth. For example, an inexpensive six-pack of pansies could supplement featured plants early in the season and be removed later.

“We want a planter to be beautiful immediately,” says Richard Hentschel, a horticulture educator with the University of Illinois Extension in St. Charles. If you space plants with room to fill in, the arrangement “just looks weak. It doesn’t look like the store-bought version.”

Or you could be patient, planting with expansion space. Decorative rocks or attractive mulch can cover temporarily exposed dirt patches.

You might mimic the gardening industry’s planting strategy of using “thrillers, fillers and spillers,” Hentschel says. Use a tall plant, often a grass or other spikey shape, in the middle as a thriller. Softer, mid-height fillers surround it, and a trailing plant or vine spills out for drama.

For any strategy, pinch off or trim unsightly, dead flowers (“deadheading”). That encourages further blooming.

Tennessee Master Gardeners launch Crapemyrtle Bark Scale Task Force

JACKSON — Concerned gardeners are educating Tennesseans about an invasive pest that could decimate a landscape favorite.

Members of the Madison County Master Gardeners, along with horticulturists with the University of Tennessee Gardens and UT Extension, have created the Crapemyrtle Bark Scale Task Force. This group says they hope to spread the word about the damaging crapemyrtle bark scale before this insect spreads to more Tennessee trees.

The crapemyrtle bark scale is a non-native insect, first detected in the U.S. in 2004. It was discovered on crapemyrtles in the Memphis area several years ago and has now moved eastward. The scale appears as white, felt-like encrustations on the bark, often near pruning wounds or at branch junctions. As the infestation increases, a black sooty mold appears on the bark and leaves.

“We have come to depend on the crapemyrtle as a beautiful, low-maintenance addition to our landscapes, and because of this

you can find them in almost every Southern neighborhood,” says Jason Reeves, curator of the UT Gardens, Jackson, located at the West Tennessee AgResearch and Education Center. “That’s why we formed this task force. We need to educate homeowners on how to identify and stop the spread of this pest.”

Reeves says there are options for controlling crapemyrtle bark scale, including applying a systemic insecticide, applying dormant oil to the bark, or washing the trunk with soap and water. If homeowners do not want to invest the extra time and money in controlling bark scale, Reeves recommends total removal of infected plants to prevent the spread to other crapemyrtles.

The task force has compiled a series of videos on bark scale identification and control. They can be viewed at west.tennessee.edu/ornamentals. Information will also be available on the Facebook pages for the UT Gardens, Jackson, and Madison County Master Gardeners.

The Madison County

Master Gardeners is a program of the county’s UT Extension office.

The UT Gardens includes plant collections located in Knoxville, Jackson and Crossville. Designated as the official botanical garden for the State of Tennessee, the collections are part of the UT Institute of Agriculture. The Gardens’ mission is to foster appreciation, education and stewardship of plants through garden displays, educational programs and research trials. The Gardens are open during all seasons and free to the public.

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