

# In-depth Design

by Terri W. Starman with Kathy Pufahl



Following these seven principles of design will turn your combination planters from agriculture to art form

**K**athy Pufahl of Bed and Borders, Laurel, New York, is a grower/artist who's elevated container gardening from plant form to art form. And while it's true that some people have a knack for creating attractive combinations, with today's variety of plant material and a few principles of designs in your bag of tricks, anyone can capitalize on this new trend.

Here are seven principles of design that you'll want to consider when designing container gardens. Not every design principle has to be used in every design. And you can emphasize just one of the design principles in a container garden, such as making color the dominant feature. On the following pages, we'll analyze three of Kathy's designs to see how she uses these principles to create true works of art.

## Plant form, texture

To achieve a pleasing container garden, you need to vary the form of the plant material you choose. This means using tall species to add height, mounded species to add mass and low-growing, cascading species to fill in, add depth and soften the edges of the container. Adding coarse, medium and fine-textured plants into one container garden adds interest and allure. Three to five species should be adequate to achieve an assortment of forms and textures.

## BALANCE

A container garden needs to look stable, so it must be visually balanced. One of two types of balance may be used: symmetrical or asymmetrical. Symmetrical balance is formal and geometric. It consists of equal, almost identical elements (plant materials) on each side of a central axis, with the highest point over the center of the container, like a

globe or equilateral triangle. Asymmetrical balance is informal, relaxing and somewhat abstract. The two sides of the central axis are not mirror images but they have the same visual weight. Asymmetrically balanced designs are often L-shaped or at right triangles.

## FOCUS

Focus is another design tool. It's the point or area where your eye is drawn first. An effective way to develop focus in a container garden is with one large-leaved or coarse-textured plant or a vibrant-colored flower or foliage. Place the focal plant below the tallest point in the container garden to achieve balance. In symmetrical balance, the focus is in the center of the design. In asymmetrical balance, the focus is off center but still underneath the highest point, which is visually balanced by placing a cascading species to form a vertical line out from the focus. Focus is also developed by making it appear as though all of the plant material is radiating out from the center of the container garden like the fronds on a fern.

## PROPORTION

When putting a container garden together, keep the size and quantity of the plants in proportion to the pot. You can use bigger and/or more plants in large containers, and less and/or compact plants in small containers. The rule of thumb is the height of the tallest plant shouldn't exceed one to two times the height of a tall container or the width of a low bowl. When a container has a pedestal, it's usually not necessary to include it in the overall container measurement

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because the visual weight of the pedestal is usually insignificant.

## Rhythm

Rhythm is what gives a work of art flow and harmony. Repetition and gradation of plant form, texture, and color develop rhythm. Repeating color or plant cultivar at regular intervals around the outside of a round container or along the length of a long rectangular container gives rhythm to symmetrically balanced container gardens. Graceful lines of linear plant leaves and cascading foliage also add rhythm to container gardens.

## Color

Color theory is another design principle. Color theory involves creating color harmonies using the color wheel. In monochromatic color schemes, the lightness or darkness or strength of the color may vary, but only one color is used. Monochromatic color harmonies are quiet and soothing. An example would be flowers that are light tints and dark shades of red. Using colors closely related (next to each other) on the color wheel creates more drama. This is an analogous color harmony—using plants with red violet, violet and blue-violet, for example. Complementary color harmonies use colors opposite one another on the color wheel and demand attention, such as using yellow- and violet-flowered plants.

Neutral colors—black, gray and white—aren't on the color wheel but can have visual impact in a container garden. Gray and dark-leaved plants add depth. Gray foliage makes all other colors of foliage or flowers look brighter and deeper. And you can use a neutral color to separate colors that clash or are too strong.