

Rented space

Kelly Baldry

I am a ‘renter’ – one of the generation who lives in private rented accommodation, either through choice or through lack of choice. This is my seventh house in eleven years of renting, so for me a garden has to be portable. Every plant I own is grown permanently in a container, for several reasons: the ability to retain plants of my choice, the instantaneous garden effect, and maintaining my investment in plants, not just in terms of money but also of growth brought about by time.

Of course some plant-lovers choose to have a container garden because they have just a small space, or the soil is unsuitable for their plants. And many gardeners use containers to add interest or a focal point, perhaps to display a particular specimen.

The photographs demonstrate the height and contrast made possible by a mixture of grasses and perennials. All the plants are grown in containers, primarily pots, of various shapes, sizes and finishes. I hope the pictures also show the depth of view one can achieve using only groups of containers, the year-round interest and the opportunity to study a plant in detail. How many of us have the time and patience to sit and watch a plant grow through a season? But place a pot in front of a well-used window, and the garden comes to life in a single plant – displayed from its first fresh shoots through maturity, flowering, senescence and decay. Even spent foliage can be of interest on a winter’s morning.

The arrangement of the containers is important, and an ongoing experiment. Each group consists of colour-coordinated plants and a variety of pot size and style, and a mixture of grasses/perennials with sometimes an evergreen for structure. Some groups have an additional pot for seasonal changes. I refer to



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Colour and contrast in late July

‘containers’, as I have a large wooden half-barrel, a stone trough and two hanging baskets – but generally I prefer terracotta pots as even different styles, shapes and finishes are cohesive en masse. The pots are generally neutral in colour with an occasional glazed coloured finish used for contrast.

I must emphasise that the mixture of plants is rarely within the same container – rather I put a single specimen in a single container, and the mix comes from the arrangement of a group of pots. This makes it easier to repot and divide specimen plants without excessive root disturbance. Generally, only the specific seasonal-interest containers contain a mix, for instance, *Viola* with young *Stipa tenuissima*.

Wherever there is a mix within a container, there is also a colour scheme – usually of three colours. So a green grass goes with two solid-coloured violas (white and purple), and a variegated grass (such as *Carex oshimensis* ‘Evergold’) is planted with a type of viola which has two colours in the petal – yellow and purple – so it ties in with the yellow/green grass and each complements the other, without the container looking overdone.

In summer spare pots are filled with annuals (pelargoniums, lobelias and calibrachos), and in winter I use violas alone, or mixed with grasses and heucheras. The leaf shape of the heucheras complements that of the violas, but winter pansies can be used if you are prepared to accept a slightly longer mid-winter period without much flower. I have found violas flower continually in all but the harshest of conditions, and although frost damages both heucheras and violas, they are quite resilient and soon recover.

There are no set rules, and the limitations are the boundaries of one’s experience and plant palette. One of my goals has been to discover which plants are truly container worthy, ones that in addition to filling an otherwise empty space create an interesting garden with height and movement. For a photographer it’s an opportunity to create a view through a lens – digital photography has brought a fresh dimension to recording and remembering plants.

I have established a working collection which excels in containers – and if the plant is capable of fulfilling a demanding role in a container, it will certainly thrive in suitable ground conditions. Arguably the container is a more hostile environment – a confined root space, possible lack of

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Grasses with *Heuchera* and *Astilbe*

nutrients, and total dependence upon the gardener for food and, in particular, water. Roots bake in the summer and freeze in winter. The biggest cause of failure is waterlogging in cold conditions during winter. The reverse can also be true, as the artificial growing environment can be manipulated to suit individual plants. Careful preparation of the growing media, appropriate feeding and watering, and suitable positioning of pots, can overcome challenging weather conditions.

As far as growing medium goes, I use a 50/50 mix of John Innes No. 1 or 2, and peat or mainly peat. I have tried using reduced-peat alternatives, but they seem to consist of varying amounts of bark and wood waste. This type of material quickly decomposes, leaving a wet, sticky mass in the bottom of the container which restricts root run, retains excessive moisture, and cannot be reused simply by adding fertiliser. A small amount of grit is added for plants such as *Stipa* which require poorer soils and/or sharper drainage. I put 20–30mm of stone/grit at the bottom of all containers. I never use pot feet or plant saucers – they look untidy, add expense, and complicate the process. I use 6-month controlled-release fertilizer (Osmocote), mixed in on planting, and when repotting or dividing in spring.

I like to water with a watering can whenever possible – it gives me a chance to inspect each plant individually. I have become used to tipping each pot to feel its weight and gauge how much water it needs. Watering with a hose is fine, and it's all right for a quick top-up at the end of a busy day, but I never seem to pay quite so much attention with one. I never use a surface mulch of any description – it falls off when the pot is moved, and it's harder to judge how dry the growing medium is.

An additional way of controlling moisture is to add annuals. In summer the annuals draw moisture and nutrient away from drought-tolerant species, preventing lax, over-extended growth. In winter, the violas prevent *Heuchera* and *Stipa* from becoming waterlogged.

Finally, an adaptation of the 'right plant, right place' mantra. The containers are positioned according to the sun/shade requirements of the plant. This is important for growth rate, leaf colour and flowering, and it also prevents stress caused by moisture loss in species such as *Deschampsia*. In my current garden there is no tree cover, so the shade is provided by adjacent buildings.



Grass seedheads contrast with *Heuchera* 'Blackberry Jam'

My garden is primarily based around grasses – few other plants offer so much interest over a long season. And grasses also give height and movement, without which my garden would be just a random collection of pots in a space. A vista through grass, or with grass behind a plant, brings the scene to life. I am an unashamed grass enthusiast, tempered by reality and by my partner’s reminders that we’re not creating a prairie in the back garden.

I realise some readers may switch off at this point (not another grass article!). Perhaps the reluctance to use ornamental grasses is down to the unsuitable types which local garden centres offer, and which are poorly maintained and displayed; it is worth using specialist nurseries. How many people have happily purchased *Pennisetum setaceum* ‘Rubrum’ only to watch it die in the first winter (it requires about 4°C to survive), or become frustrated at the multiple self-seedlings produced by *Anemanthele lessoniana* (pheasant grass) – assuming that it, too, survives a harsh winter.

I use *Panicum virgatum* ‘Warrior’ and *P. v.* ‘Squaw’ both for autumn colour and a green accent earlier in the season. *Stipa calamagrostis* is superb for long lasting seedheads, while *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* ‘Overdam’ and ‘Karl Foerster’ provide height and accent. I would not be without *Stipa tenuissima* – the white seedheads give bright highlights and hold frost in winter. *Carex flagellifera* droops away happily in a bright blue pot, and *Helictotrichon sempervirens* is an unmistakable, strong blue contrast. *Festuca glauca* is a colourful mound in the foreground, and *Carex muskingumensis* has

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Seasonal interest – *Heuchera* and *Lobelia*

a striking form in a shady corner. *Deschampsia cespitosa* ‘Goldtau’ seedheads are beautiful when back-lit by sunlight; few other plants can replicate its light, airy presence. *Calamagrostis emodensis* holds its seedheads high, and *C. brachytricha* seedheads are suitably late. *Carex oshimensis* ‘Evergold’ brightens the winter with violas growing through its foliage, displayed in hanging baskets. And I have just added *Hakonechloa macra* for foliage interest in part shade. Each grass fulfils a purpose – and that is its point.

While the common thread tying the garden together is the grasses, they are accentuated and complemented by the contrasting foliage and flowers of perennials, and the structure of the evergreens. Each container has to work

hard individually, and also form an association with its immediate neighbours to make a group – which in turn contributes to the overall display.

When selecting grasses I look first for quality of basal foliage and visual impression during flowering, then for longevity of the seedheads. For perennials, I want a long season of repeat and consistent flowering, and foliage which will contrast well with grasses. The evergreen shrubs serve a different purpose altogether, providing permanent structure, a base for the rest. All the plants must withstand the winter in a container.

Some extremely garden-worthy plants that I use in the ground (in the gardens I work in) and associate with grasses just do not work in containers. *Osteospermum jucundum* (which needs to spread laterally, and root) and *Sedum spectabile* (which looks top heavy) have been replaced with *Gerbera* Everlast Carmine and *G. Everlast* White.

Finally, some statistics. I have a total of 84 containers, almost all different shapes, sizes and finishes of terracotta pots. In them are 13 evergreens, 1 deciduous shrub, 22 sole grasses, and 5 annuals with a grass, 1 evergreen with a grass, 35 sole perennials, and 3 annuals with a perennial, and 4 only annuals. The proportional mixture is roughly the same for summer and winter – 33% grasses, 45% perennials, 17% structural plants and 5% seasonal. These figures are based on the permanent-interest plant in the container, and interestingly reflect a hardy perennial majority. This appears to be contradictory for a grass-based garden, but the perennials serve as both an antidote and a foil, balancing the more dominant forms of the grasses.

Roughly one third of households now live in some form of rented accommodation, so this alternative to conventional plant-in-the-ground gardening is significant. A container garden can be both portable and changeable; it provides opportunities for instant alterations not possible in a conventional static scene. This type of garden will never be low maintenance, not least because of the watering regime, but it is much better than no garden at all. And the input is worth it – my rented space is filled with a visually satisfying blend of plants. 🌿



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Late summer elegance and maturity

Kelly Baldry is a professional gardener specialising in commercial properties. He began gardening eight years ago at the age of 39, and had minimal gardening experience prior to his career change.