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Potful of options



Container gardens are a designer's delight for both landscapes and hardscapes

By Karen Dardick

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When it comes to designing with pots, Danica Hirsch makes big statements.

From a four-acre property in Rancho Santa Fe to a La Jolla town home with courtyards and balconies, she includes pots to liven up hardscapes and landscapes alike.

Hirsch, along with Samantha Owens, owns Barrels & Branches, a specialty nursery in Encinitas featuring drought-tolerant and unusual plants. They also sell lots of decorative pots, and encourage customers to think beyond the basics when it comes to planting and placing them.

“Pots give you the opportunity to bring the outdoors closer to the house,” Hirsch said. “Plant pots and keep them on patios so there's a transition from garden to house. If the house has sliding-glass doors leading to a courtyard, placing pots near the doors can make the space seem larger and also connect the yard with the interior.”



JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune
Artfully placed pots, like this one by a Rancho Santa Fe pool, help link indoor and outdoor spaces, says Danica Hirsch, who sells containers (below) at her nursery Barrels & Branches.

Instead of placing pots in stingy singles, Hirsch likes to group them in odd numbers. Nor does she simply stick one on a table. She might place a large container in a corner, and a slighter smaller one in front to break up the mass, and then another on an opposite side of a balcony or courtyard.

As gardens continue to shrink in size and busy people have less time to tend large landscapes, potscaping can be a satisfying way to enjoy the creativity of creating a garden, but in a small, less complicated manner.



JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune

Pots can be planted with one dramatic sculptural plant like an agave, palm or bamboo. Or you might want the movement of ornamental grasses, accented by a trailing border of ivy or flowering plants.

Decorative accessories

A simple definition of potscaping is the art of growing and placing plants in pots and other containers. Ray Rogers, a lifelong gardener and author of “Pots in the Garden: Expert Design and Planting Techniques” (Timber Press, \$29.95), takes the concept to another level.

“Potscaping is a nifty word combining pots and landscaping,” he said in a phone interview. “But you don’t need to restrict pots just to hard surfaces. Place them in beds, along walkways, or any place in your landscape where you want to make a statement.”

Rogers gardens in New Brunswick, N.J., so he has to protect some of his choice heat-loving plants like yucca and sedum by moving these containerized specimens into protected places in winter. San Diego gardeners have an easier time and can create permanent potscapes more easily.

Rogers designs gardens with pots and containers in a similar way that an interior designer decorates a house.

“Think beyond growing something in a pot,” he said. “Instead, it can become a decorative object. It’s the same idea as how you would arrange furniture indoors. Grass or whatever on the ground is like the floor in a house. Hedges and fences form the walls. Big trees and the sky serve as the ceiling.

“Container plantings become the decorative accessories. Think of them as lamps, pictures and art objects. This takes container gardening to the next level and creates excitement.”

Avoiding clutter is key to successful potscaping design. “Don’t overdo it,” Rogers said. “Use some restraint to avoid visual clutter.”

Hirsch recommends uniformity of pots, especially in small spaces.

“Pick a theme, like modern, Victorian, or country, that suits the house,” she said. “Use the same color, or harmonious colors. If you like blue, use cobalt and then add some other blue hues. If your house is modern or Asian, you might like red pots with clean, contemporary lines.”

Picking pots

Design principles of color and texture apply to plants and the pots in which they grow. In “Pots in the Garden,” Rogers explains some basic points for pot selection:

Know your plants. They need movement of water and air within the potting mix. Don't try to grow a big or potentially big plant in a too-small pot. Conversely, don't place small plants in large containers. Watering can be more complicated, especially if water doesn't penetrate a small root zone. Or if there's an excess of wet potting mix, roots can rot.

Avoid “waisted” pots (containers with constrictions somewhere below the top of the pot) and those with sides that taper out toward the bottom, except when growing annuals or other plants for only one season. It can be difficult to remove plants with large root zones from such pots when the time comes to replace them.

Consider the expense and relative permanence of the pot material. Use cheaper clay, plastic or untreated wood for short-lived displays. Select more expensive but more durable terra cotta, fiberglass, metal or stone for topiaries or large plants that may live for years in the same container.

Moisture can cause porous pots to crack or flake.

Consider sturdiness. Porous materials or stone can be damaged more than plastic, resin, wood or metal.

Consider weight. How much weight can you manage? Dollies and casters are helpful, but you still have to get containers on them. If you garden on a deck, roof or balcony, consider the combined weight of all containers you plan to use.

Plants for pots

When planting pots, Hirsch advises building the design around one structural specimen, like bamboo, palm, upright shrubs or ornamental grasses.

“From a distance, it will always look finished,” she says.

But she doesn't stop there. She likes to include trailing plants around the base of the container. Foliage plants like ivy are somewhat permanent. For people with the time to spend, she recommends changing out annuals according to the season so there's year-round fresh color and visual interest.

She recommends large containers, 50 inches tall, with statement plants for large spaces like swimming pools or large outdoor living areas. One of her favorite combinations is an Australian tree fern with cyclamen and trailing ivy for partial shade.

For sunny spots, she selects drought-tolerant plants like wax flowers (*Chamelaucium*) underplanted with ivy geraniums. Agaves and aloes are also high on her list of favorite specimens.

Rogers has other plants he prefers. Herbs top his list. “You can create an entire herb garden in a pot,”

he said. He also loves coleus for their colors and textures. Annuals are among his favorites because they don't take a lot of effort to keep them growing.

Placing pots

Once the pots are planted, Rogers offers the following potscaping techniques:

Place a colorful pot as a focal point in the landscape. "The best place is at the end of a view, such as a walkway or patio," he said. "Even a tiny garden will seem bigger."

Line up several pots to define or edge a section.

Put a pot spilling over with colorful flowers or foliage in front of a hedge or fence, where it will stand out.

Group several pots, with taller in back and smaller in front, for a strong statement.


Choose pots that complement the plants rather than clash with them.

Where surface tree roots interfere with putting plants in the ground, use pots instead, said Hirsch. Be sure to select plants that prefer full to part shade.

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