

Not All Pots Need Pansies

Without a doubt winter hardy pansies at our doorstep make our going-out and comings-in more cheerful. But there are other beauties that can be used. Bruce Barton, owner of "The Flower Pot" on 17 at Grafton, brought a large selection of plants and pots to the November Gloucester Master Gardener meeting and demonstrated the breadth of our choices.

Before considering the plants, it is necessary to evaluate your containers. Pansies and many other hardy plants can be put right into the soil to enhance your flowerbeds, the hopeless strip by the street and vacant spots here and there. But for front steps and decks and patios you might want something in a container that show it was put there to brighten the winter.

Your first choice might be the big and beautiful clay pots inspired by traditional Italian or Mexican designs. They are practical for sheltered locations where they can be kept from freezing or planted with hardy species that survive not only cold but also dry. It is the moisture that cracks clay when it expands in freezing.

Mr. Barton used large metal basket-type containers lined with fiber mats very effectively. Concrete containers are often used but they too are both heavy and prone to crack unless their surfaces have been waterproofed.

Hypertufa is ideal because it has the look of aged stone but is made of Portland cement mixed with peat moss and perlite, which makes it a lighter, more manageable weight. If it has been allowed to age a month or so before freezing weather it will survive the worst winter can bring. (If you or your group or club would enjoy making these irresistibly handsome troughs call Felicity Ericson (804-693-7140) or Judy Doyel (804-824-1013) for information.

Watching Mr. Barton arrange miniature evergreens, junipers, and sedums, I thought how wonderful they would look in hypertufa troughs.

An erect, miniature evergreen centering a pot could surely invite the use of holiday lights. *Lavandula x intermedia* 'Dutch', lavender with its aromatic grey-green leaves, violet-tinged green buds, and dark violet flowers would be perfect centering a large container.

Another interesting plant not often seen in containers is *Cyrtomium falcatum* 'Rochfordianum' Japanese holly fern. The "holly" refers to the shape of glossy dark green fronds. The pretty junipers were 'Bar Harbor' and 'Blue Pacific' and either would be elegant draping over the edge of a container. For smaller pots on a doorstep or near a window on an outside deck, a collection of small sedums would serve as a focus. *Sedum*

rupestre will have yellow flowers in summer but looks like a miniature blue spruce forest in winter. Another, a tightly curled mossy mat is *S'Utah*'.

Drainage is critically important during a wet winter. All sorts of ways can insure that the roots won't drown. You have probably seen the catalogs offering quaint small frogs to act as feet under a pot, even tiny gargoyles. For the inside of the pot you can use broken clay shards, packing peanuts, anything lightweight that water can leave easily. Poor drainage provides a home for unwanted fungi, white fly eggs, and other horrors you do not wish to encourage.

It is important to use a potting mix for containers. Soil gathered from behind the garage won't do. It will pack down and smother the roots, introduce weeds you haven't seen in years and turn even a small pot into a heavy lumpy load. Another tip Mr. Barton offered was to add the time release fertilizer beads to the top as needed, if needed, instead of mixing it into the planting mix.

After all, you do not want these treasures leaping out of their containers in a growth spurt like a teenager out of his jeans. Pansies, violas, and small bulbs can add the fillip of color you want but during the dark days ahead, even a range of greens in a variety of textures will be a welcome to hour visitors. One oddly colored plant is a new (to me) *Heuchera*, '*Amber waves*'. With its curly bronze/olive leaves this Coral Bells resembles an early spring lettuce. I hope the one I found last week will not be eaten as a vegetable by my garden's resident rabbit.