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**TRY CONTAINER GARDENING TO BEAT THE SUMMER HEAT**

With the summer heat, wind, and salty sea spray affecting our patio gardens, maybe it’s time to consider filling containers with heat/wind/salt tolerant plants and flowers that will provide color throughout the season.

First, there are a wide range of containers to choose from, and there are advantages and disadvantages to each of them. Clay pots are often the first choice because they are affordable and beautiful. Unfortunately, they tend to dry out quickly in hot weather, so a drip tray is needed. Plastic pots don’t dry out as quickly, are less expensive and come in a wide range of colors. The new lightweight fiberglass pots also come in a great variety of styles and are a good choice for the patio. Be sure there is a draining hole in the bottom so that the plants don’t drown.  Cover the hole with rocks or broken crockery to prevent the soil from running out. Other container choices include window boxes and hanging baskets.

Use the “Rule of Three” when selecting plants for your containers: A tall plant for height, several medium sized plants, and one or two trailing plants or vines. If your container is very large, put several inches of Styrofoam peanuts in the bottom to keep it from getting too heavy. Then fill the container 2/3 full with potting soil. Tap the plants out of their pots and lightly tease the roots apart before placing them in the pot. Fill in around the plants with potting soil mixed with a slow release fertilizer. Be sure to water until it begins to run out of the draining hole.

Even with our demanding coastal climate, there are countless plant combinations that make stunning container displays. Feel free to experiment with different plants to end up with the look you like. Just remember to choose plants with similar sun and water requirements. Some hot color combos that can really take the heat are: Tropicana cannas, portulaca, and purple wandering Jew.  A group of multi-colored zinnias would look great with a solid yellow lantana. Blue and silver colors add a cooling look to your patio. Try mealy blue sage (*Salvia farinacea*) with silvery dusty miller and a trailing licorice plant (*Helichrysum*). “Wave” petunias would look great in containers with yellow marigolds and lambs’ ear. Another fun combination using a pedestal container would be Gulf muhly grass surrounded by variegated English ivy.

Shady areas of a patio will accommodate many different combinations. Rex begonias, impatiens and creeping fig brighten a shady corner. Coleus, Persian shield, and lime green sweet potato vine would also perform all summer in light shade or morning sun.

Sometimes a grouping of solo plants adds more “wow” factor to your patio. African bush daisy, plumbago, miniature roses, crotons, pentas, dessert rose, and foxtail palm are all good selections. Just remember to make sure your groups require the same light.

Vegetables are also attractive and grow quite happily in containers. Peppers add bright red color to a sunny area. Herbs, such as basil, feathery dill, or rosemary mix well with a floral planting. To add a custom design, try using unusual containers such as old boots, baskets, or maybe even an antique wheelbarrow! Be creative, but don’t overdo. Too much yard art leans towards tacky rather than artistic. Whatever combinations you try, be sure to keep your containers well watered and use a good fertilizer as instructed.

Lastly, succulents are always a good choice for container gardening, especially in a windy, salt sea spray area. “Hen and chicks” (*Echeveria*) are a tried and true succulent that does well in our area. Also, agaves and yuccas are quite resistant to salt. Since they vary in hardiness, be sure to choose ones that are winter hardy for our area. And as to hanging baskets, the tried and true moss rose (portulaca) and burro’s tails are great for an area protected from heavy winds.

While coastal gardening can be trying at times, experimenting with what works best on your own patio is very satisfying. Talk to your local Master Gardeners and nurseries and they will help you plan for a patio of beautiful container plants. Remember to consider three things before you start: How much wind your patio gets, how much sun/shade, and how hot/cold it gets during the year.

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