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## **AUTUMN CONTAINER GARDENS**

The history of container gardens goes back thousands of years, but this unique form of gardening has blossomed into a pastime enjoyed by hobbyists worldwide in the last half-century. Millions have discovered the immense satisfaction in growing something beautiful, in creating interesting combinations of plants, experimenting with new plants, and getting to know plants more intimately than they ever could with plants in the ground. Every day is a good day to create a container garden and autumn offers colors and textures that are showstoppers. No matter where you live or how much garden space you have, there is always room for plants grown in containers. You do not have to be a pro to achieve beautiful container gardens. The most important things to remember are to have a container large enough for what you want to plant in it, to use the best potting soil you can find, to make sure the pot drains well, to water and fertilize regularly and to use healthy plants.

The themes for container gardens are endless and are guided by your imagination. What plants do you really love? What would you like to achieve? Perhaps you have an area in your garden that just needs something to dress it up. Perhaps you don't have the space for a vegetable garden, but want some homegrown veggies. Container gardens will brighten porch steps and walkways. They enhance patios and decks and are wonderful mixed in with existing garden plants. The options are endless.

The floral splash of summer container gardens doesn't have to fade as days shorten and temperatures drop. This fall, fill your pots with plants that will linger colorfully into and through winter. Start your gardens with a planting mix that is rich in peat moss. For an easy-care garden, mix in a slow-release fertilizer according to instructions. When designing your garden, plant the center of the container first. Use the taller plants for the center. Then work your way to the outer edges. Shake excess soil from plant roots before placing plants in the container. Try colorful mums in the center, surrounded by pansies and trailing ivy. You can plant spring blooming bulbs such as daffodils and tulips among these plants so that you will have vibrant blooms in early spring. Pansies last all thru the winter, especially if you keep them deadheaded, which means removing the spent flowers. Or mix garden mums with evergreens such as hardy azalea, holly and variegated vinca. Once cold weather nips the mums, remove them and let the evergreens take over. Again, spring bulbs can be planted among these plants. Ornamental cabbages and kales are great mixed with snapdragons and pansies. There are so many colors of pansies and violas to choose from that the

combinations are endless. They look great planted alone. Pansies do well from fall into late spring.

As it gets colder in late fall, there are several options to help protect your planters from winter cold. The easiest way is to move them next to a wall or an area with a southern exposure. The sun's warmth radiates from the wall or fence and provides frost protection. When it gets really cold, the pots can be wrapped with burlap. Or you can set them in a larger container and fill the gap between the pots with leaves. Leaves make a great insulation against cold and frost. You can also nestle the pots in mounds of leaves. It helps to locate them in a place that is sheltered from winter winds. Even though it might be very cold in winter, you should still water your containers at least once a week or more if they are small. Apply water in the afternoon if possible.

Almost anything can be grown in a container allowing you to express your sense of style with color, form, texture, proportion, and other design elements. So get started! There is still plenty of time to have great container gardens for the rest of summer. The rewards will be well worth the effort. Happy gardening!!!