

Container Plants for the Summer

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Growing plants in containers on the patio can provide decorative blooms and even nutritious vegetables. The containers can be colorful glazed materials, plain plastic or clay. Half whiskey barrels work if you have plenty of space, but smaller containers are more versatile. Fill your container with potting mix and fertilize with Osmocote or a similar product. Some container plants are drought tolerant, but most require frequent watering because they have a small soil reservoir. That being recognized, container plants are often easier to manage than plants in gardens, because of less weed and soil pest problems.

Consider bougainvillea, firebush, pentas, moss roses, and peppers for containers on your patio.

Bougainvillea is available in many shades of pink and red, plus off-white, variegated and lavender. The normal version has a simple bloom that falls off when it fades. The double bloom selections have more colored bracts, but the faded blooms hang on the plant.

All bougainvillea are cyclical in their bloom usually with a 6-week period of color followed by three or four weeks without flowers. The red and dark pink varieties seem to have longer bloom periods than the other colors.

Bougainvillea requires full sun to prosper. It is unusual in that it blooms better when the container is allowed to dry out before more water is applied. When you do irrigate, provide enough water so that it soaks the soil and leaks out the drain holes.

The plant also does best when it is well fertilized. Granular hibiscus food or Osmocote work well. Some gardeners even apply a soluble fertilizer like Peters or Schultz every other irrigation.

Another key to maximize bougainvillea bloom is to have it reach a root-bound state. It is easiest to reach this situation if you grow the plant in a 10- or 12-inch container. Prune the top to be 2.5 times as large as the container and keep it at that size by tipping back the main stems.

The tipping also encourages more side stems and at the end of each side stem a colored bract will emerge.

Firebush has two personalities. In the ground it is a drought tolerant, undisciplined, six-foot shrub with reddish foliage and small red tubular flowers that freezes back to the ground every winter. In a 5-gallon container it has the reddish foliage and blooms, but it only grows to form a 2-foot round, disciplined plant that requires regular watering. The version in a container makes a showy addition to a full-sun location on the patio. In addition to being attractive firebush on the patio is a favorite hummingbird plant. If you place one on the patio expect the hummingbirds to compete for possession of the blooms. The action will get especially exciting later this fall when the migrating hummingbirds move through San Antonio.

Penta is another good choice for the patio for summer color. There are several varieties to choose from. My favorites are the selections that grow 14 inches or taller. They do well in medium sized containers (20 inches or larger). Penta flowers are available in red, lavender, pink and white. Grow them in the shade where the hummingbirds and butterflies will use them as a nectar source. Pentas are in bloom at

the nursery when you purchase them, and they will stay in bloom until cold weather arrives after Thanksgiving if you keep them well-watered, they are not xeriscape plants. The plants have a unique ability to move a new cluster of blooms up above the foliage in time to take over for the blooms that are fading. Pentas do not require deadheading.

For a small growing container plant, consider moss roses. They produce quarter size blooms in red, pink, white, yellow, lavender, and orange on plants that run along the soil surface at about 3 inches tall to 8 inches around. They bloom during the day. Moss roses have attractive succulent like foliage and are drought tolerant. One issue to consider when using moss roses is that the foliage and blooms are sometimes eaten by sparrows and other birds.

We can grow lots of different vegetables in containers. In the summer peppers are the best choice. They respond well to the heat and prosper in full sun to produce either hot or mild peppers for fresh-eating, salads or recipes. The mild banana peppers are yellow and jalepenos will turn red at maturity if you want color along with a handsome plant and nutritious fruit. Peppers will do well in 3 gallon or larger containers. If the vegetable production is not important there are also many ornamental peppers to use in containers on the patio.