

Recipes for Fall Container Designs That Sell!

Container design sales are all about the personality you bring to them; your unique ideas lead to great relational sales opportunities, which lead to better sales.



By Christina Salwitz

I've spoken at Cultivate (long before it was Cultivate) about how to sell more fall container designs so many times that I think my message has finally begun to sink in to the wider audience. Back then, the fall options were mums, more mums, some asters, ornamental kale, pansies, violas, cyclamen and, just for kicks, MORE mums!

After writing two books on designing with foliage as the primary backbone in any design ("Fine Foliage" from St. Lynn's Press, "Gardening with Foliage First" from Timber Press), it still kills me that though we're getting so much better at using plants like ornamental and non-ornamental edibles, herbs, succulents and so many other interesting new introductions that I feel like we're still missing some key points that extend those fall sales.

Opportunities Abound

There are many different ideas and opportunities that you can incorporate into your fall containers, so let's take a quick peek at some ideas that your IGC might be missing.

1) Create a truly INTERESTING container. Beige and gray may be sophisticated and "safe," but they don't turn heads and make the neighbors talk. In my gray Pacific Northwest climate, color and texture are what make or break a fabulous fall and winter container

display. There's no need for it to be garish, but consider using color boldly. Your customers need to be trained to see fashion at times, and if all they see around town is "greige," they will feel strange at first admitting that they crave some color.

Fashion magazines/websites don't show only the safest ideas; if they did, they'd be out of business in a heartbeat. They sell from the concept of what's "possible," not what's "expected." From lime green to burnt orange or even purple, bold colors can still be plenty classy if the planting and the container pairing are well done. Even if you're using black or white, those can be quite dramatic if the planting is full of drama. If you do play it safe with color, at least think texture.

2) Sell plants from the WHOLE garden center. Take that customer's cart through the groundcover section, the conifer section, the vines ... think out of the box!

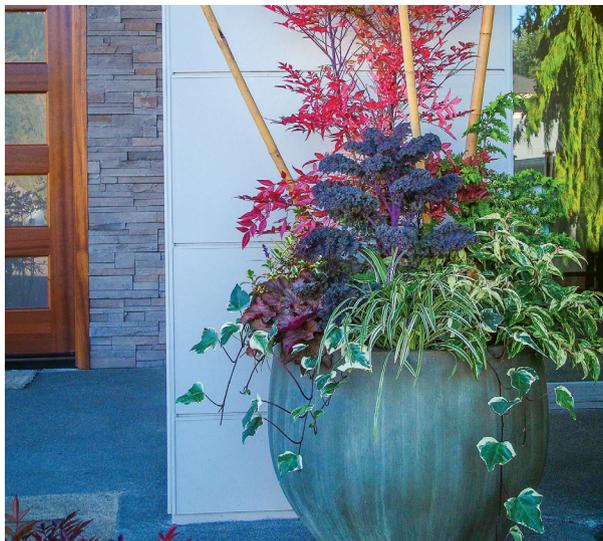
Ask the customer if there is a plant they have more of in their yard that looks great in fall and winter that they want more of, and voila! You now have the beginnings of a direction to go in and start with that! Are they a collector of dwarf conifers? BOOM! Do they need more ornamental grasses in their landscape? GREAT! Adding some of those to the pots will be a wonderful way to add value to their containers — and when they take them apart come spring and put them in the landscape, who will they think of for the next plant purchase?

Have you had a hard time selling that cute little shrub that no one quite understands when it sits on the sales floor? Add it to a combo and, all of a sudden, it gets seen in a whole new light. One of my favorite comments from customers when they see this done is "THAT can go in a pot?"

"Yes, ma'am, it doesn't know where it's at."

3) Introduce UNIQUE color combinations of both





foliage and flowers for fall and winter! Please, I beg you to try it and see what happens when you introduce the idea that lime and teal can indeed look gorgeous for fall and winter. Or that variegated and silver leaved plants simply glow in the dark months of low light.

Also, be sure to help customers understand what happens to certain foliage when cold hits them; they often turn lovely shaded colors of bronze, purple and reds that you might not ordinarily take note of if you're overly focused on the flowers. One of the quotes I used in the books I wrote is that "Flowers are fleeting, but foliage is forever." The flowers are simply the icing on a really great cake, but if the cake itself is awful, then who cares about the tasteless icing flowers?

4) Texture and fragrance are INCREDIBLE links in a combo. These elements can be the bridge that helps tie everything together to make that sale go from "nice" to "Whoa!" quickly.

Lemon thyme is a lovely textural addition to brighten up a pot, but then you can start talking about using that thyme for a gin or vodka infusion and then you open up an entirely new sales conversation that might lead to Bloody Mary recipes.

Or teach the customer how to properly "caress" a lemon cypress and that her given name is "Wilma" and you've now opened up a friendly new game of "Well, then what this one's name?"

I realize that I am spoiled to live in a mild winter climate, though last winter's "Snowmageddon" would tell you otherwise, but even the basic silver sage in a fall container combo can spark an awesome conversation about using it for the Thanksgiving turkey or as a stuffing herb, which is bound to spark the debate over who has the best stuffing recipe.

Evergreen ferns and even ivy can be special in the right context — just look to show off unique varieties if possible. Even then, I will fall back to some of the more pedestrian ones to challenge

**Evergreen ferns and
even ivy can be special in
the right context — just
look to show off unique
varieties if possible.**



myself to make them "look special."

5) Mix it up with a few "faux" additions and garden art. No one will judge. In fact, they'll likely copy it! I wrote earlier in the year about my growing distaste from the overuse of the birch log centerpieces in winter combos. I did it myself years ago and loved the look back then. It was a great and unique idea years ago; now it's so overused it's become an assembly line unoriginal. I even had one person comment snidely, "Well, then what are we supposed to use for vertical height?" I had to snicker a bit because this designer was just following others and not using her creative design skills to come up with something fun, interesting and different of her own choosing.

I've personally gone through the faux stems section of garden centers and craft stores and come up with some fun ideas. I painted cheap willow stems construction cone orange; I even did them in an ombre look in candy-corn colors — and that was a huge hit! But, outdoor safe stems of all kinds that will hold up in the weather are options. Tinted cat tails, sparkly twig balls, burgundy faux eucalyptus, faux grasses, even oversized bamboo poles are dramatic — the options are endless.

The bottom line is that container design sales are all about the personality you bring to them. Your unique ideas lead to great relational sales opportunities which lead to better sales.

Drop me an email and let me know what ideas your IGC has come up with for fall and winter containers that might be jaw-dropping ideas for your customers to ponder when your competition is doing the same old same old. 🌿

Christina Salwitz, the Personal Garden Coach, is a container designer, public speaker, horticultural guidance counselor, service provider for The Garden Center Group and photojournalist based in Renton, Washington. She can be reached at: personalgardencoach@comcast.net.