



This ornate container welcomes autumn with a dramatic arrangement of variegated ivy, yellow-twig dogwood stems, birch sticks, evergreen magnolia leaves, various winterberries, and the foliage of golden arborvitae and false arborvitae.



As the growing season comes to an end, repurpose materials from your garden to create beautiful outdoor seasonal container displays.

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS
BY CLAIRE JONES



Seasonal Porch Pots

AS A garden designer, I am often asked to provide fall and winter interest in a garden with the help of plants that have attractive berries, peeling bark, evergreen foliage, or brightly-colored stems. I've discovered that you can take advantage of these same ornamental qualities—and repurpose containers that once held summer

annuals—to deliver seasonal interest on porches, decks, and patios.

Late-fall and winter foraging offers a unique opportunity to dress up these past-their-prime containers with something both structural and festive that will last for several months. These easily created arrangements, sometimes referred to as “porch pots,” are supported by the existing

soil in the pots, so no Styrofoam is needed, thank goodness. The added branches aren't rooted or growing, so they require little to no care. On those occasions when I have an evergreen element, such as a yucca or rosemary, growing in a summer container, I try to incorporate it with my arrangement.

Placed where you can see them from your windows, and in prominent sites

Top left: Incense cedar drapes over the edge of a blue pot crowned with magnolia leaves and sprays of 'Winter Gold' winterberry. **Top right:** Create vignettes by pairing porch pots with decorative seasonal objects, such as pumpkins, as shown here.



The author grows most of the material for her arrangements in her garden, above, but also collects items like these lichen-covered branches, right, from a dying larch (*Larix* sp.) tree on a friend's property.



near your entrances, these will provide a cheery welcome to visitors and long-lasting color during the bleak winter days when you are not able to get out to the garden.

SOURCES FOR COLLECTING

The best thing about porch pots is that no trips to the garden center are required. I get most of my material by harvesting from my own garden or, with permission, from the gardens of friends and neighbors. I have even foraged inside my home, using the wonderful textural split-leaf philodendron (*Monstera deliciosa*) leaves to great effect.

I also occasionally supplement this with material carefully foraged from undeveloped private property owned by friends, but I follow strict guidelines to avoid affecting plant communities (see box, page 18, for my foraging guidelines). I also carry pruners in my car in case I see fresh yard trimmings left out for trash or composting. Once, when I purchased a Christmas tree, I asked for and received permission to take some fresh evergreen tree trimmings.

SUGGESTIONS FOR MATERIALS

Regional choices are part of the fun when selecting the materials for your porch pot. I live in Maryland, and this region of the mid-Atlantic offers a veritable candy box of options including all kinds of conifers and berry-bearing plants. On the West Coast, similar diversity prevails, with in-

teresting options unavailable to me like salal (*Gaultheria shallon*) and eucalyptus. A list of good choices from various plant categories can be viewed on page 19.

I try to limit each container to five or six selections, vary the textures, and always include a broad-leaved variety such as magnolias or camellias for contrast. If you add too many ingredients—or stick with only fine-textured materials—you might end up with a “busy” container.

PREPARING MATERIALS FOR ARRANGING

Use sharp, clean pruners to cut the materials and then plunge them immediately into a bucket of fresh water. After you have gathered all your material, remove some of the lowest branches on each stem so you can easily insert them into your container of soil. Then make a fresh, angled cut at the base to increase surface area to enable water to enter easily into the plant tissues.



Harvested foliage, branches, and berries hydrate in tubs of water prior to arrangement.

ARRANGING TIPS

When designing your porch pot, use the same design principles that you would for a summer container. Always add any substantial elements, such as magnolia foliage or large birch logs, first. After that, I follow what is often called the “thrillers, fillers, and spillers” method. Use a thriller like an upright spray of winter berries or yellow-twig dogwood, a filler of feathery evergreens surrounding the thriller, and spillers like incense cedar or privet berries that gracefully drape over the rim of the pot.

Before adding any materials, thoroughly moisten the soil in the pot and let it drain. To simplify your porch pots, start with a pre-made evergreen wreath base placed on top of your container, then begin inserting sticks, branches, etc.

Once you have placed all the materials to your satisfaction, water the pot thoroughly again. Check the soil after a few weeks and water again if needed to keep the branches fresh. When freezing weather arrives, the branches will be locked into place. Embellishments such as holiday decorations or light strings can be added whenever you like.

Porch pot care is easy. If strong winds blow some of the larger branches askew, simply readjust them; this is a good time to also replace any branches that are looking weathered with fresh ones. —C.J.

HOW TO CREATE A SEASONAL PORCH POT



1. GATHER YOUR MATERIALS, making sure you have a variety of textures and colors.



2. LAY A FOUNDATION with foliage. This blue spruce wreath makes a quick base.



3. CREATE HEIGHT AND STRUCTURE, here with yellow-twig dogwood and arborvitae.



4. FILL THE FRAME. I used bold magnolia leaves for a contrast in color and texture.



5. ADD SPILLERS like this dyed eucalyptus to soften the edge of the pot and create movement.



6. COMPLETE THE ARRANGEMENT with boughs of berries for dramatic flair.

FORAGING GUIDELINES

Here are some guidelines to follow if you forage material from natural areas:

- Follow the principles of “leave no trace,” and leave the collecting area the same or better than when you entered it. Harvest only a tiny percentage of any one type of plant.

- Make sure you can identify what you are collecting to ensure you don’t take anything potentially rare or endangered—or poisonous. The USDA website <https://plants.usda.gov/threat.html> includes a state-by-state list of threatened plants. Make yourself aware of any regional laws regarding plant collecting; in California, for instance, it is illegal to collect manzanita (*Arctostaphylos* sp.) branches.

- Be aware of invasive plants. While harvesting invasives may be beneficial, be sure that any seeds or berries are disposed of properly in the trash or burned after you use them.

- If you walk into natural areas, use bug-repellent and wear long pants and closed-toe shoes to protect against ticks and poison ivy. —C.J.

Store the materials in a bucket or tub of room-temperature water in a cool, dark space for several hours. If you have a large enough tub, you can submerge entire branches for five to six hours or overnight, which will completely hydrate the foliage.

Spread out dried evergreens on an old tarp and spray on both sides with an anti-transpirant like Wilt-Pruf or Wilt-Stop. By coating evergreens with a waxy covering, the anti-transpirant will reduce and retard moisture loss in icy winter winds, enabling the evergreen boughs to stay supple for weeks. However, be aware that using anti-transpirants on cedar, blue spruce, or juniper berries can damage the wax coating that gives these plants their distinctive color.

CONTAINER SELECTION

Simply use an already soil-filled container, bushel basket, or galvanized tub to hold your structural elements in place. Hayrack planters and window boxes can also be used, as long as you adapt the size of the materials. No special containers are needed, but you should make sure the container



Fothergilla foliage, nandina berries, and dried hydrangea flowers fill a fall pot.

has drainage holes and won’t be damaged if subjected to freezing conditions. A container without drainage holes may overflow during a downpour, making a mess on the porch, and those made of terracotta and ceramic—which absorb water—might crack during periods of freeze and thaw.

If you don’t have any summer containers to repurpose, you can fill large pots with sand or garden soil. The material just has to be solid enough to support the plant stems and retain some water so the stems stay hydrated.

LONG LASTING

My porch pots typically last from early October to late January. Placing the containers in a protected area out of direct sun and sheltered from winter winds will

help extend the life of your arrangement.

You can refresh or completely replace the materials to reflect the next season or holiday. Switching out miniature pumpkins for holly branches, for instance, is one way to signal the transition between Thanksgiving and the end-of-year festive season and keeps the porch pots fresh and up to date.

Porch pots can become a signature feature of your home, reflecting and highlighting the plants in your garden, showcasing your creativity, and offering a warm seasonal greeting to visitors at the entrance to your home.

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GREAT PLANTS FOR PORCH POT ARRANGEMENTS

The wealth of material you can use for porch pots is extensive. Here are some plants that I rely on and recommend. —C.J.

FOLIAGE PLANTS

Arborvitae (*Thuja* spp.) Long-lasting, scaly evergreen makes a good filler. The gold-tipped variety, 'Berckman's Golden Arborvitae', adds a zing of color to an all-green arrangement and looks wonderful with yellow-twig dogwood branches.

Boxwood (*Buxus* spp.) I thin my boxwoods in the fall by selectively removing branches from congested shrubs.

Cedar (*Cedrus* spp.) The wispy evergreen branches of scented cedar are great draped over a pot rim.

Eucalyptus spp. Available on the West Coast, the bluish-green foliage adds structure and fragrance.

Fothergilla spp. One of my all-time favorites for fall foliage, the leaves turn a brilliant red, orange, and yellow as the days get cooler.

Holly (*Ilex* spp.) The prickly foliage of evergreen hollies (especially variegated) is a great addition to arrangements, but only if treated first with an anti-transpirant to keep them from drying out.

Incense cedar (*Calocedrus decurrens*) Available on the West Coast, this wonderful, aromatic, dark green evergreen makes a great spiller.

Japanese cedar (*Cryptomeria* spp.) Graceful plumed clusters of this evergreen are sometimes tipped with small cones. The emerald-green foliage turns a bronzy hue in winter.

Japanese maple (*Acer palmatum*) Branches with flame-colored leaves hold up for several weeks.

Laurels (*Prunus laurocerasus*, *Laurus nobilis*) These broad-leaved evergreens add substantial texture to a porch pot.

Leyland cypress (*x Cupressocyparis leylandii*) This quick-growing conifer offers dark green, scalelike boughs of greenery that drape nicely and last for months.

Oakleaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia*) The leathery leaves have beautiful, long-lasting autumnal hues.

Salal (*Gaultheria shallon*) The leathery leaves of this Pacific Northwest native are valuable for adding texture.

Southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*)

ra) Large, lustrous, leathery leaves make a statement. The conelike, red-seeded fruits are a bonus.

Spruce (*Picea* spp.) Norway, white, and blue spruce are all on my list of great additions, although heavy branches can make them a little hard to work with.

White pine (*Pinus strobus*) Both green and variegated varieties add a wonderful, frilly, long-needled filler that gracefully arcs out of a container.



STEMS

Birch (*Betula* spp.) The papery white-clad logs sticks add instant pizzazz to a pot.

Curly or corkscrew willow (*Salix matsudana* 'Tortuosa') I grow this fast-growing, short-lived tree just for use in arrangements. I cut it down to the ground each spring to allow a fresh harvest.

Yellow-, red-, orange-twig dogwoods (*Cornus sericea* selections) I wait until late November for all the foliage to drop off before cutting dogwood stems.

DRIED FLOWERS

Allium spp. These starburst seed heads range from medium-size to some over one foot in diameter.

Hydrangea spp. Mopheads (*H. macrophylla*) can be picked when mature for a lovely rose or blue/purple coloration. Oakleaf (*H. quercifolia*) and paniced (*H.*

paniculata) flower heads dry an antique sepia color tinged with pink highlights.

Ornamental grasses The feathery plumes of various ornamental grasses add interest to arrangements.

Sorghum spp. I grow about a dozen plants so I can use the handsome rusty-red seed heads in containers.

BERRIES/FRUIT

Beautyberry (*Callicarpa* spp.) I wait until frost shrivels up the foliage to harvest so the white or purple berries stand out on the naked branches.

Blackberry lily (*Iris domestica*, syn. *Belamcanda chinensis*) Seed heads open to reveal shiny black berries that stand out in a container.

Chinese dogwood (*Cornus kousa*) The edible fruits resembling pink sea urchins dangle from the cut branches and add an exotic touch; great for a "spiller."

Hawthorn (*Crataegus* spp.) I cut sprays of the ruby-red fruits from hedgerows.

Juniper (*Juniperus* spp.) Blue juniper berries and the accompanying graceful foliage are excellent "spillers."

Nandina spp. Nandinas bear trusses of long-lasting orange to red berries that flow gracefully in an arrangement.

Privet (*Ligustrum* spp.) The sprays of tiny purple-black berries of this invasive plant are excellent draping over the edge of a container.

Pumpkin on a stick (*Solanum integrifolium*) This is an ornamental orange eggplant that I grow from seed. I collect the branches in the fall and use them for Halloween and Thanksgiving arrangements.

Rose hips (*Rosa* spp.) Gathering rose hips from multiflora shrubs is a fall ritual. The tiny, coral-pink fruits held in a starlike spray make a long-lasting addition. *Rosa rugosa* has more substantial pumpkin-shaped fruit.

Viburnum spp. This genus is full of wonderfully colored berries and fall foliage.

Winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*) Winterberries in red, orange, and peach, are my favorite "thriller" for containers. I collect branches in late November after the leaves drop. ☺