

DESIGNING MINIATURE GARDENS FOR HOME OR SHOW - PART 2

by Betty Ferguson

Selecting Materials for Your Container Garden

You've checked and double checked your schedule and have a general idea of your landscape design. You've brushed up on the elements and principles of design. And now, you're ready to incorporate your materials into your design.

Choosing Your Container:

First, decide on the size and shape that's appropriate to the schedule and available plants.



For a dish garden, a rather wide and shallow vessel helps to create the illusion of a miniature landscape. Select a container deep enough to provide room for the roots, soil, and necessary drainage materials. A traditional Japanese dish garden is planted in a 1" tray. For African violet shows, the judges frown on containers much deeper than two inches. The shape of this shallow dish may be oval, round or square, but with the Japanese the shape is most often oval. *The African Violet Society of America Handbook for Growers, Exhibitors, and Judges* (p. 71) says a shallow, long stemmed compote dish would be just as acceptable. Other possibilities include dinner-ware, saucers for large pots, plastic-lined wooden bowls and boxes, shallow baskets, antique and reproduction items such as the basin from basin and pitcher sets and metal containers. Use a neutral color. A visually active container demands very simple plantings. A container with simple lines and subtle colors permits the variety of exotic plants to catch the eye. Traditional Japanese tray color is blue mottled or plain white.

For a terrarium, any shape is acceptable. A square or rectangular fish aquarium is the easiest to plant. I prefer the natural look of rounded bowls even though the round sides can distort the view somewhat. Bubble bowls, brandy sniffers, and cookie jars may be used. A cover is required. You can have a glass cover cut at a glass company or use plastic to fit. Glass is easier to slide open to allow steam to escape. The Handbook states the container must be transparent. Regarding the use of mirrors, Bill Foster wrote in the July-August 2003 *African Violet Magazine*, "A mirror is opaque so it would not be transparent. Furthermore, a mirror tends to distract from the landscape plan." On the other hand, Paul Kroll wrote in the July-August 2006 magazine, "It is, however, possible to have mirrored backs approved, so long as the schedule states so." Paul prefers mirrored backs as they add depth and interest and cut out the distraction of background or wallpaper busyness.



Bottle gardens present to be started earlier than enough to fit through the



their own challenges and usually need other designs, while the plants are small bottle top.

Natural gardens can be planted in driftwood, a log, a stump, a seashell, a

piece of lava rock, a gourd or other natural containers.

Choosing Your Plants

Choose plants that are compatible with African violets and with your design. If any of your plants even smack of having a cactus or succulent look, unknowledgeable judges may not realize the plants are not actually in the cactus or succulent family. Some succulents naturally grow in the same conditions with African violets, but violets are rarely able to withstand the extreme conditions succulents can exist in.



Really hunt for small plants to keep from overwhelming your container, which you may find at planting time is smaller than you imagined. But make sure you have enough height. Here are a few container plant hints:

1. Put down cuttings about 3 months in advance. Easy-to-root plants may take less time.
2. Some plants that really like the terrarium environment are episcias, gesnerias, petrocosemas, pilea, artillery plant (*Pilea microphylla*), miniature begonias, some ivies, ferns, and miniature palms.
3. Learn all you can about bonsai. Dwarf azaleas, some begonias and geraniums, barberry and cotoneaster, cedar and juniper, yew, boxwood, small leaved peppers, and privet hedge are just a few that work as “trees” in container gardens. It’s hard to find “trees” with small enough root balls—one of many reasons to grow your own bonsai trees. Many plants tolerate severe root ball pruning.

No cut material is permitted in container gardens. Only live, growing plants are allowed, i.e. have roots. Discussion has been hot about using driftwood, pine cones, acorns, and sticks because they are plant material but aren’t growing. Paul Kroll explains this controversial issue saying, “A possible exception to this might be a piece of driftwood (relatively small in size, used as an accessory, very discreetly, and lying down, to represent a fallen tree or log....Height should be achieved by plant material and not by a large rock or piece of wood standing up [as high or higher than the plant material] within the container.”

Use a tall plant(s) for height, medium sized bushy plants for the transition, and ground cover or plants that grow close to the ground such as small ferns. Remember: Sufficient height is one of the primary elements judges look for. It’s generally accepted that the height be about 1 ½ times the diameter or height of the container, but other experts say this should not be a firm rule.

If you use a clump of trees, place some shorter trees in the back to give the illusion of distance. Other ways of creating the illusion of distance include using tall moss or bigger blossoms and leaves in the front and shorter/smaller ones in the back. If you notice the trees and mountains in the distance fade into hazy pastel colors. Use brighter colors up front and bluer or grayer and lighter colors in the background.

Vary your texture and color so that all plants of the same texture and color aren't in the same place.

It's okay to use other flowering plants, but don't use flowers that distract from your violet for an African violet show. A natural color blossom is preferred for dish garden violets rather than multi-colors.

Since there's rarely room in the nooks and crannies of natural gardens, you can wrap the roots of your plants in moist sphagnum moss to reduce transplant shock and wilting.

To Accessorize or not Accessorize?

You don't have to use KISS principle. Make sure center of attention in your create the greatest charm is slightly hidden behind



accessories at all, but if you do, follow the the accessories don't take over as the garden. As a rule, minimal decorations and delight. A good place for accessories greenery. Natural accessories such as a stick representing a log, a rock, a stone path, water features, or a tiny pinecone are acceptable accessories.

Ideas for "water" include: mirrors, slate, blue aquarium gravel, dyed sand, sliced rocks, plastic wrap, paraffin, and candle jell, or broken windshield glass.

Going Shopping

To save money, buy small plants and grow them out or take cuttings from plants already in your collection. If you need instant gratification, buy plants just the right size and ready to pack into your dish garden, but remember, finding what you need is a gamble, especially for early spring shows.

Collecting container garden materials and miniature plants makes a fun secondary hobby in itself.

Bud's Melanie

Christel Collier photo

