

CONTAINER GARDENS: CREATING A NATURAL GARDEN

“My Way. . .”

by Mary Lou Harden

I love all the Sections and Classes in our African violet shows, but my very favorite are Classes in the Design Division. Of course, it's just delightful to hear all the “oohs” and “aahs” when the public comes to see the show and they first gaze on those (usually) big, beautiful and bountifully blooming standard, semiminiature and miniature African violets. For some people, it's their introduction into the world of African violets as well as the other Gesneriads.



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a show, they must read the show schedule.

It's equally as exciting to not only hear the breath-taking comments but to observe the gaze and wonderment conjured up in the hearts and minds of the people as they stop and study the design exhibits. In most cases they “get” what the designer had in mind as the design was created. Other times, they don't “get it,” but the designs still evoke emotion and comment. Club members may feel intimidated and think of the design division as too much of a challenge for them to even consider doing. I tell them it's only because they've never accepted the challenge and fear of the unknown is what's holding them back.

In order to understand what the various classes and sections are all about, club members should be encouraged to read the AVSA's Handbook for Growers, Exhibitors and Judges and yes, even take a judges' hool! And if they are thinking about entering

The Design Division of AVSA or affiliate shows is divided into three sections: (1) Interpretive Flower Arrangements, (2) Interpretive Plant Arrangements and (3) Container Gardens. A Natural Garden is a part of the third Section known as Container Gardens. According to AVSA's Handbook for Growers, Exhibitors and Judges, affiliates may include all three of these Sections in their show schedules, or they may include only one or two.

For the first two sections, Interpretive Flower Arrangements and Interpretive Plant Arrangements, the Show Schedule will list Class titles which are related to the overall theme of the show and, for that reason, some people may find it difficult to come up with

ideas for creating a design. However, with the third section, Container Gardens, there is usually no theme, they are untitled and for good reason. The goal here is to create a miniature landscape garden, according to a landscape plan, in a confined space, using one or more blooming African violets along with other plants, all of which must be planted in the container. In other words, no cut plant material is allowed.

Accessories are permitted, but they should be in keeping with the idea of a garden, not a museum, and they should be used sparingly and judiciously. The use of a stone or stones, a piece of wood, an imaginary stream or lake can be effectively used.

For this article, I'm focusing on Natural Gardens. A Natural Garden is a planting in a container formed from natural material such as weathered wood, lava rock, seashell, or maybe even a sponge. It may have more than one planting area or pocket. Remember that in putting together a Natural Garden, you will be demonstrating your creativity. Your creation will evoke an emotional response from those who see it.

Here are the steps I follow when creating a Natural Garden:

1. Read the Schedule – Always the first rule in making any design

- a. Are there any size or other limitations?
- b. Does it require a theme? AVSA suggests that there should not be any themes for Container Gardens. This makes sense since some exhibitors enter established container gardens which may not easily be altered to conform to a class title.

2. View

The Schedule should state whether the exhibit is to be viewed from the front only - or several or all sides. Why does this matter? If the exhibit is able to be viewed on all sides, that means great care must be taken to cover the back side of the exhibit so that it too will have pleasing appearance.

3. Choose your Container

- a. Driftwood? Shell? Make sure it fits the size requirements in all directions.
- b. Although I have used both lava rock and a seashell, I prefer using driftwood.
- c. No matter what container you choose, sometimes the container--driftwood or sea shell--"leans" or otherwise doesn't set level. In that case, you will need to add a small piece of wood or a flat stone or piece of sea shell to stabilize the container so that it will be balanced – it must be sturdy and able to be easily moved.

4. Construction

- a. If using weathered wood, brush the wood on all sides, maybe even use an air hose on it to get rid of any loose sand or hiding bugs. Or you can soak the wood overnight.
- b. Turn the wood different ways to find the best view. Over the years, I have used quite a few pieces of driftwood. Some had several natural planting areas and others I've had to slightly modify by creating some "pockets." To do this, select light-weight, thin pieces of tree bark or pieces of palm trees. Break them or cut them into shapes that "fit" into the line of your wood, then glue them in place. Of course any mechanics must be covered so are not apparent. I like to use moss to cover the planting medium as well as any mechanics.



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5. Planting

a. The overall size of your container will determine the height of your plant material. You must take into consideration not only the width and height of your container, but also whether it has a heavy or light appearance. Scale is important.

b. Select well groomed, clean, fresh plants of different size, texture and color. As a general rule, you should use 5 different kinds of plants, not including the violets.

c. Remember that ALL plants used in your design must be planted in the container and no cut plant material is permitted. Remove the plants from their pots, break off some of the soil around the roots, then wrap the root ball in very wet sphagnum moss. Be generous with the amount of sphagnum moss you use - otherwise, the plants will dry out and become wilted. You can then wrap the root ball with a rubber band or wire to hold it all together.

d. Your design must have visual, if not actual, balance.

e. Place your violet(s) last - so they will look perky and fresh.

f. Finish the design by covering the soil with preferably fresh green moss, making sure that there is no trace of perlite or other obtrusive objects.

g. Spray mist the arrangement often during the show - but keep heavy mist off the violet blossoms.

The AVSA Scale of Points for Container Gardens is:

Landscape Plan.....40 points

Suitability of Materials.....20 points

Condition of Materials.....20 points

Cultural Perfection.....10 points

Relation to Container.....10 points