



*Bulbs in the Basement*  
*Geraniums on the Windowsill*

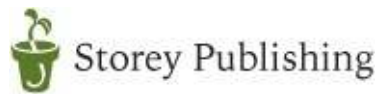
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**BULBS IN THE BASEMENT GERANIUMS ON THE  
WINDOWSILL**

How to Grow and Overwinter **165 TENDER PLANTS**

Alice and Brian McGowan



*The mission of Storey Publishing is to serve our customers by  
publishing practical information that encourages  
personal independence in harmony with the environment.*

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*We dedicate this book to our daughters,  
Leah and Emma, in the hope that they will  
continue to enjoy plants despite a surfeit of  
early exposure to them.*





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# CONTENTS

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## A LITTLE HISTORY

### Gardening with Tenders

- *What Is a Tender Perennial?*
  - *Container Combinations*
  - *Choosing a Container*
    - *Soils*
  - *In the Garden*

### Overwintering Your Plants

- *Overwintering 101*
- *The Importance of Temperature*
  - *Setting Up Your Site*
  - *Preventing Pest Problems*
- *Specific Pests and Diseases*
  - *Spring: The Transition*

### The Tender Palette

- *How to Use This Guide*
  - *Plant Lists*

## SUGGESTED READING

## RESOURCES

## CELSIUS CONVERSION CHART

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

## INDEX

# ***A Little History***

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LIKE SO MANY THINGS IN LIFE, the road that led to our discovery of tender perennial plants was not a particularly well-marked one. It's hard to pinpoint exactly when we began our journey upon it, but we would never have arrived at our eventual destination if we hadn't begun with the dream of operating a diversified fruit and vegetable farm. This was the road we thought we were headed down in the early 1980s, when we grew vegetables for the wholesale market — lettuce, early tomatoes, and red peppers for specialty outlets.

We had always grown flowers too, and when, in 1981, we moved onto the long-abandoned Magdycz farm in Montague, Massachusetts, it included a neglected perennial bed. We enjoyed reviving it and discovering new plants hidden in the weeds. For years we had eyed the potential market for ornamental plants and concluded there was already an abundant supply of them. But in the spring of 1988, when our daughter Leah was three and Emma was six months old, we planted flowers among the six-packs of lettuce in the greenhouse.

## **Quiet Beginnings**

That first spring, we set up a tent on the side of the road. If you never visited the nursery, you probably can't imagine what an out-of-the-way spot our location was. In those days, our neighbors were all residential or wholesale farming operations. No vehicle went by that we didn't know, and, in fact, very few went by at all.

Even that first quiet season, we noticed encouraging signs — one of which was that people traveled out of their way for well-grown plants they couldn't find elsewhere. And that when they shopped for flowers, they were happy to pay more than they did for tomatoes and lettuce. Our plant selection that year was a simple one. We grew standard annuals in six-packs, and then a few that no one else seemed to bother with, like cosmos and lobelia. We already had a thriving wholesale sideline in herbs grown in four-inch pots, so we sold those too. We listened to our customers' requests for plants they couldn't find. Alice had a good memory then, so she didn't have to take notes.

The next year, Brian built a simple stand near the road, with a plywood counter, a lattice roof, and some wooden shelves for flats of plants. That summer we erected our first aluminum hoop house to overwinter perennials. That spring Emma compliantly rode on Alice's back in a frame carrier most of the day. A sun hat kept her face in the shade, but she had very well-tanned limbs. Fortunately, she was not only a light baby, but also a cheerful one.

Early on, it became clear to us that if we were going to survive as a retail business in a remote location, we were going to have to offer something unusual. A small newspaper ad we ran during the late 1980s said simply: "We're not on the way to anywhere, but you'll be glad you came." We spent winters combing catalogs for plants we'd never grown, many we'd never heard of.

## **Early Gardening Friendships**

It wasn't long before we became intrigued by the many annual plants no one seemed to grow anymore. Our friendships with several veteran gardeners were instrumental in the development of this interest.

Esther Colburn grew up in the hills of Shelburne Falls, then married and settled with her husband in our valley for the remaining 70 years of her life. An accomplished painter and amateur naturalist — our daughter Leah still remembers her demonstrations of how to stand very still with birdseed on your outstretched palms to attract chickadees — Esther was also an accomplished gardener who was curious about the world around her to the very end of her life.



Despite the challenges of visiting with two children under three, visiting Esther brought alive a period in gardening history that Alice had previously known nothing about. Esther remembered decades before, when perennial plants had been popular, and pointed out her *Macleaya cordata* romping happily in the shade. That shade was simply the result of small trees she had once planted in her yard. While batches of hazelnut cookies baked in the oven, she introduced Alice to stacks of old catalogs from Logee's Greenhouses dating back to the 1920s. Esther had always started her own moonflowers indoors, and recounted planting obscure plants for dried flowers in the forties.

Our friendship with Esther was a brief one — she died soon after her 90th birthday — but the influence of her friendship was enormous. We began to collect old seed catalogs, especially those from the Victorian era, when the populations of both England and the United States were smitten with botanical diversity and everyone wanted pieces of the newly discovered world in their own backyard.

At about the same time, we met Elsa Bakalar, a well-known gardener and the author of *A Garden of One's Own*. Alice enrolled in Elsa's Introduction to Perennial Gardening class, a workshop that involved visiting her established gardens in nearby Heath. Alice learned a tremendous amount from Elsa, whose gracious generosity is legendary. Elsa transformed a hilly, rock-filled field into a magnificent series of English borders. Her gardens were a testament to her finely tuned sense of color and design and a lively interest in plants.

## Planting on the Road

From the beginning, some of our most successful promotions consisted of planting what we were growing where others could see. It was a simple and highly effective strategy. As difficult as it is to believe now, in 1989 we were having trouble selling our customers an obscure annual called cleome. We had noticed a single plant of it a few years before while on a Sunday drive. That June, when we were left with several flats of transplants, Brian decided to plant a hedge of cleome by the road. By August it was a traffic-stopping sight — 250 continuous feet of bright pink cleome plants, four feet high. The following spring, nearly everyone who came to the nursery was looking for it. If customers hadn't seen what cleome looked like in high summer, we probably never would have sold all those spiky, odd-smelling seedlings.

In an industry that famously avoids selling its product “green” — pushing dwarf, pack-sized marigolds to bloom quickly so they sell — we were trying to convince customers to buy on faith. It took time, but eventually many did. One of the ways we achieved this was to plant extensive display gardens.

We began with perennial borders in the sun, first small beds in front of that original lathe structure. In 1989, Elsa designed a long perennial border that enclosed an entirely new garden area. We first planted an herb garden at its center, but by the early 1990s, inspired by our first visits to Wave Hill in the Bronx, New York, we replaced that with four rectangles featuring annuals — and later included tender perennials. We planted every daylily on our list in a crescent-shaped bed toward the back of the field. In 1997, when we took down the old farmhouse, we planted a woodland garden in its stead. Elsewhere, we established a heath and heather bed and additional perennial borders — and a rock garden had come and gone. The nursery included a full acre of gardens by the time we closed it in 2005.

## The Tender Question

So first we grew annuals, then perennials — but where do tender perennials fit in? Answering this question isn't easy, in part because it was a process that happened gradually, almost in stages. Our early involvement with herbs led quite naturally to overwintering tender stock in the greenhouses. For

years we kept scented geraniums and bay laurel and lemon verbena indoors for the winter. Initially, like many herb enthusiasts, we kept them in our sunny kitchen. Then, as they grew beyond that space we heated a limited portion of our smallest greenhouse.

Looking back, it was serendipitous that among the generous gardeners we met in those years was Rob Nicholson, at that time the manager of the Botanic Garden Greenhouses at Smith College, in Northampton, Massachusetts. He met Brian during a visit to the nursery one spring day in 1994. The most important development to result was the arrival of Ida Hay, Rob's wife, as a member of our nursery's permanent staff the next year. But Rob played another decisive role: as the facilitator of our first acquaintance with the tender members of the genus *Salvia*. In one of the routine house cleanings that any greenhouse must periodically have, he passed along a group of plants the Smith greenhouses didn't need — older stock that had outgrown its pots, leggy or woody specimens superseded by fresh cuttings.

Among these was a group of tender salvia species. They had arrived at Smith through another twist of fate, having been given to the college by Richard Dufresne, a specialist collector and breeder of salvias from North Carolina. He visited the area on a regular basis, and eventually, he too, became an annual visitor to the nursery, eventually acquiring many of our own salvia introductions, disseminating them in turn to a wider audience. But in 1994, only a handful of salvia species were grown by northeastern gardeners, and we were fortunate to encounter this exciting group of plants.

Brian planted them out in the field along with rows of hardy perennial stock, and we watched them that summer. As they bloomed with abandon through heat and drought, we were impressed. Brian potted them up in the fall, and moved them into the greenhouse. That was probably the beginning of our serious involvement with tender perennials — certainly with salvias. By 2004, our final spring season, we offered 74 species and cultivars of salvia in print, and Alice is fairly certain that a few more never made the list. Salvias remained, to the end, one of the plant groups our nursery was known for, but we soon became involved with tender perennials of all kinds.

## Choosing Plants

The plant selection for this book was made in much the same way that we regularly chose what to grow at the nursery. And because the plants included here are mostly ones we actually grew, the book is based upon our nursery experience.

Often selection was based on past success. In this fashion, we assembled collections of favorite genera, like *Ipomoea* and *Nicotiana*. We continued to grow a given plant because it was particularly floriferous, had interesting foliage, presented a strong or attractive form, or — best of all — boasted all of the above. We exercised a preference for plants that were easy to grow and avoided fussy ones, especially those that had problems with insects or diseases when cultivated under our growing conditions. We completely avoided growing plants that required regular spraying. We found that often choosing what to grow was a matter of finding the right cultivar or selection — some cultivars are just inherently weaker than others. Experience taught us that the way to find the best is to try growing as many as possible.

We've used the phrase "common pest problems" to indicate pests that may be a problem for a particular plant. Given the right conditions, any plant can succumb to or attract nearly any pest. The problems noted here, however, are ones that the plant in question is particularly susceptible to under average growing conditions.

## Exhaustive? No

The longer we've grown plants, the more we've realized that there'll always be more to try. This book

is not, by any means, exhaustive. It is a compendium of plants that we have enjoyed and recommended. We encourage readers to be adventurous and try new plants.

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Consider mail-order nurseries as a way to obtain exciting new specimens. These nurseries are in a position to specialize or to grow a wide variety of plants they might never sell on a local basis. One that specializes in tropicals or succulents, for example, might offer more of these than you've heard of.

If such a resource is located near where you live, support it. A good nursery offers gardeners a great deal more than just the plants for sale. Its proprietors may share information about plant culture based upon their experiences and preferences. Nothing compares with the opportunity to observe plants before you buy them, particularly planted out, where you can appreciate their mature size and habit.

## **Expanding Horizons**

We also encourage you to visit interesting gardens both in your immediate area and whenever you travel. Observing other gardens is one of the best ways to expand your horticultural horizons. Take a notebook and ask questions.

When we first began growing Blue Meadow Farm, we didn't entirely appreciate that we were both in different ways, oddly suited to this undertaking. Born in Sligo, Ireland, Brian spent his early years helping his mother in their backyard vegetable plot before his family made the move to the suburbs of Cincinnati, Ohio. Alice had been introduced to the world in Tokyo, and spent a peripatetic childhood moving every few years from one country in Asia to another before ending up in New England for high school. We both knew firsthand about other climates and cultures — we still kept in touch with our countries of birth. Perhaps this equipped us with a more-than-average sense of adventurousness, and our imaginations were grounded in real memories of people and plants in distant places. In hindsight, it's easy to see how these factors contributed to the establishment of Blue Meadow Farm.

Brian's plant and soil science training provided a scientific foundation for our endeavor and the springboard from which he created an oasis of plants and gardening where none had existed before. And although Alice took it entirely for granted at the time, assembling and cataloguing collections, as well as writing descriptions of individual specimens, were processes familiar and enjoyable due to her training in art history.

Our nursery was a unique fusion of our personal histories and passions. During the 18-year span of its life, we learned much — about plants, about ourselves, and about the wide world in which we all live and grow.

— *Alice and Brian McGowan*



How better to emphasize the bright orange spines of *Solanum pyracanthum* than to pair it with orange-flowered lantanas?

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## GARDENING WITH TENDERS

*Tender perennials are an amazingly adaptable and diverse group of plants.*

Because they've arrived in our gardens from so many different corners of the world, tenders introduce wonderful complexities and variations — of texture, bold color, and sheer drama. Caring for them is surprisingly simple when you consider all that they offer the gardener. The diversity of tender perennials lends them to a marvelous variety of uses — these are plants that range from delicate twiners to those that make bold statements, exceeding 10 or 12 feet in height. We suggest that you use your imagination and take your cues from the plants themselves.



### What Is a Tender Perennial?

Directly behind the cash register in our sales greenhouse at Blue Meadow Farm — the nursery we operated for 18 years in western Massachusetts — we hung a large sign that supplied a definition for the term *tender perennial*. But in all the time we grew and sold these plants, the sign seemed to fall short in its mission. Many visitors would point at our featured display, an exuberantly blooming specimen of the blue-flowered *Convolvulus mauritanicus* or an arrangement of anisodonta and fuchsia standards, and ask, “Now is *that* perennial?”

“Well, yes and no,” we might have replied. “It’s not a *hardy* perennial in this climate. Here, it’s a tender perennial.” Such a funny concept, one that most people seem to find challenging the first time they hear it.

What *is* a tender perennial, anyway? Put simply, it’s a plant that, though hardy in its original habitat, will not survive the winter outdoors in the climate of the gardener. Tender perennials in one zone may be perfectly hardy in a different location. But for gardeners in any location other than a true tropical one, chances are that some plants are tender perennials.

Some tender perennials are, in fact, tropical. But many others come from relatively moderate climates ~~where winters just don't get as cold or, perhaps, as wet as they do where you live.~~ From the temperate climates of the Mediterranean come marvelous gray-leaved plants — like helichrysum and santolina — that require dryness in winter. From New Zealand there are trees and shrubs, even grasses and sedges like *Carex comans*, that make delightful indoor plants. Both South Africa and the South American continent have wonderful plants that simply won't survive outside year-round in other locales, but which (we think you'll agree) can enrich your gardening experience tremendously.



*Canna* 'Striata' is considered tender in most climates north of Zone 10, but is easy to overwinter in a cool basement.

Will tropical and semitropical plants look out of place in your garden? We've spoken with gardeners who worried that might be the case. We suggest you experiment — you might be surprised. After all, the geographic origins of most hardy perennials are already quite diverse. In our experience, the visual characteristics of plants — their form, texture, and color — are far more important in creating a visually unified and satisfying garden picture.

#### **Location Makes a Difference**

The word *tender* suggests that these plants will not survive frost. But many tender perennials tolerate light or sometimes even heavy frosts. They are called tender in a particular place simply because they are unlikely to survive an entire winter in that climate. This distinction may be confusing, but it really needn't be. Even hardy plants respond to freezing temperatures in different ways. Any plant's tolerance of frost and cold is influenced by a variety of factors: hydration, stress, and the plant's recent history. In general, only plants that originate where frost is a common occurrence will withstand it consistently, and even this is not always the case.

### *Perennial vs. Annual*

SOME GARDENERS in cold climates think any plant that dies in winter is an annual. The term *annual*, though, refers specifically to a plant that blooms, sets seed, and dies in a single season. Annuals are

usually grown from seed. Lettuce poppy (*Papaver somniferum*) and signet marigold (*Tagetes tenuifolia*) are examples of annuals.

To obtain maximum show (bloom) from most annuals, it is essential to deadhead, thereby tricking the plant to create new blooms. Once it has set seed, the plant no longer has a reason to continue blooming. Many annuals will self-sow in your garden; these do, in effect, return each year. This does not make them true perennials, however; they are therefore outside the scope of this book.

In general, perennial plants do not bloom until their second year, and then they live on. Biennials bloom in the second year and then die. Of course, plants don't follow rules very well, and there are exceptions to these definitions, many of which are either short-lived perennials or biennials. Daylilies (*Hemerocallis*) and peonies (*Paeonia*), for example, are perennial plants; sweet William (*Dianthus barbatus*) is a biennial that usually blooms in its second season.

Most gardeners have noticed that the ubiquitous hosta, though reliable and quite hardy in a Zone 5 garden, is prone to react extremely to late-spring frosts. In years when these occur, hostas will generally grow an entirely new set of leaves to replace those that succumbed. Although a plant's appearance may be affected for the duration of the season, this doesn't mean that it's not hardy. It's just an indication of the structure of hosta leaves and stems, and shows that once they've begun to grow, hostas are sensitive to frost, despite being hardy to much colder temperatures while in a dormant state. It's also an indication that in their Japanese homeland, frosts rarely occur once the plants have leafed out.

Other plants seem unaffected by cold nights. Some salvias, for instance, will continue as before, generally blooming and carrying on as if nothing has happened. This is a reminder that frost does occur in the desert, where salvias originate, and also that though most tender salvias cannot survive the winter in many colder zones, they are well adapted to life in the spring, summer, and fall in those places.



The aptly named Kangaroo paws (*Anigozanthos*) are hardy in their Australian homeland but tender in most parts of the United States.

## ORIGINS ARE IMPORTANT

Tender perennial plants come from every corner of the world, and — as the hosta and salvia examples illustrate — it is important and also remarkably helpful to consider a plant's origins in order to understand the best conditions for growing and overwintering it. A desert plant will be happiest in sunny, well-drained conditions of low humidity; one from the Amazon may require both protection from the sun and extra humidity, along with temperatures well above freezing.

Having grown tender plants over the years, we find it fascinating to learn more about their origins. Gardening is one of the most tangible ways there is to gain a deeper appreciation and sense of place through interaction with your very specific plot of land. But it is also a wonderful way to travel imaginatively through both time and space — and to contemplate where in the world a particular plant grew before it arrived in your own garden.

### *Which Plants to Keep?*

**MOST HOUSE INTERIORS** tend to be warmer and drier than is ideal for many plants in containers. Are you willing to adjust the thermostat down to 55 or 60°F? Will you remember to water your containers once a week? (Don't forget to provide saucers for all the pots.) These are basic but important questions to consider before you start hauling around those heavy pots!

As tempting as it may be to save everything from the summer patio, be realistic about the storage space you have. A smaller number of plants with more space around them will be easier to keep healthy than a jungle of plants crammed into an area that's too small to accommodate them all.

Your available space for plants is an important factor in determining what will be manageable for you. Assuming that you're considering only those plants that have performed well, begin your selection with ones that would be difficult to replace. A plant might be expensive or relatively rare where you live. Perhaps you grew it from seed that took a long time to germinate or was difficult to obtain. Or maybe the plant was given to you by a close friend or relative and has sentimental value. Everyone has his or her own reasons for wanting to keep a particular plant.

Some plants are so inexpensively and readily available that it doesn't make sense to keep them from one season to another. When such a plant is winter blooming, however, or has particularly attractive foliage and form, it may be worth keeping, especially if it is also easy to care for. Most kalanchoes, cacti, succulents, durantas, many convolvulus, and anisodonteas fall into this category.

How you define *low-maintenance* is highly personal and depends quite a bit on the specifics of your space. In a cool sunroom or porch, keeping rosemary happy should be easy. But overwintering the same plant in a warmer, heated living area is guaranteed to be a challenge. In the dry, warm air of most homes, it's easy to miss the early signs that this plant needs to be watered, and serious damage may occur before you notice its distress. In a warm space without good air circulation, conditions will also be ripe for the development of mildew or for the proliferation of pests like aphids. By the same token, keeping a brugmansia healthy in a cool, sunny space might not be so difficult — but try it in a warm room and you'll be inviting an infestation of whiteflies. The decision of what to keep for the winter and where to situate it will be informed by many factors. Give each plant some thought well before you need to take action. Remember that when they're happy, plants have a way of growing, and will, in time, occupy more space than they were originally allotted.





Colorful tenders like bananas, cannas, and coleus expand your options for gardening.

### **Choosing Plants**

With all the wonderful plants available to gardeners today, our selection in this book is necessarily an arbitrary one. We have focused primarily on those tender perennial plants that we have had experience growing and that we have found worthwhile. Some of them may winter over outdoors in your climate — we have included them here because we found successful methods for growing and storing them because they were not hardy in our zone. Gardeners have many reasons for overwintering certain plants indoors rather than out in the ground.

For example, we knew a very knowledgeable and determined rock gardener who potted up the majority of her alpine plants so that they could escape the wet, and also very cold, winters of southern New Hampshire. She was amazingly matter-of-fact about the enormous amount of work this entailed each season. Her story illustrates that the extraordinary effort we put into gardening can sometimes be justified only by the pleasure we derive from growing plants. She was quite proud — and justifiably so — of her large, impressive, zone-defying alpine garden. Compared to her efforts, saving a few tender plants on the windowsill, or in whatever way makes the most sense for you, should be a relatively small investment in your gardening future.



*Convolvulus cneorum* and *Pelargonium sidoides* are two of the many fascinating plants you can observe in bloom if you bring them indoors for the winter.

#### **Why Grow Tenders?**

“Oh, I grow only hardy plants,” we’ve been informed by more than one gardener. And there are certainly arguments to be made for doing this. In general, despite the occasional winter that decimates much of the perennial garden, planting exclusively hardy plants simplifies gardening activities.

But it does limit your options. Even your grandmother probably grew plants in her garden or on her windowsills that were neither annual nor hardy. If she hung her geraniums in the cellar for the winter or kept a sweet-smelling heliotrope in a pot on a windowsill, she was simply overwintering her tender perennial plants. Many gardeners a century ago were familiar with a far greater variety of plants than most are today. One reason is that European and American gardeners of earlier periods were terribly curious about the many distant places that were still being opened to the eyes of the Western world by plant collectors. Growing the exotic plants that resulted from expeditions to those lands was a tangible way to share in the latest discoveries.

#### **SAVE MONEY**

In our own consumer culture, plants are viewed as replaceable commodities. Many gardeners simply rely on garden centers and catalogs to supply them with plant products to fill up their gardens each season. These merchandisers produce only those plants that will provide instant and predictable results, regardless of the skills of the gardener. Overwintering tender perennial plants can be a way to save money and to achieve a measure of independence from commercial marketers at the same time. And saving money by not buying the same plants year after year will extend your gardening budget.

#### **GIVE AND RECEIVE**

Tender perennials make great gifts for friends and neighbors. Winter bloomers, such as the stunning white-flowered *Convolvulus cneorum*, will remind them of you each winter when their buds open. Or

if the summer garden is the plant's moment to shine, your friends will remember your kindness at the height of the seasonal spectacle.

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Giving away plants is practical, too. It's common wisdom among professional propagators that you never know when you'll need to ask for a piece of something back. What if you forget to water during a critical time or the power goes off during a prolonged cold spell? If your friend still has the plant you shared with her, she'll be more than happy to return the favor.



This handsome basil has been trained to a columnar form during its winter storage. Now it adds foliar distinction to the summer garden.

#### **LEARN NEW SKILLS**

In the process of learning to grow tender perennials, you'll acquire new propagating skills as you maintain original plants and increase your stock. Saving any kind of plant also increases the amount of control you have over the selection of plants you're growing and of those you will perpetuate for the future. You may have more time to notice your plants when they're indoors, too, and there aren't the million distractions of the summer outdoors. You'll learn more about the varying needs of plants, which change with a specific plant's place in its own life cycle as well as with the season.

#### **SEE PLANTS AT THEIR BEST**

Saving and storing tender perennials also gives the plants more than one season to mature. Aside from the brevity of the growing season in a place like Zone 5, where we live, many plants just don't reach their full potential in a single season. Some withhold bloom until their second year, and others simply require time to grow large and impressive. Some plants are actually herbaceous in their first season and woody in the next. The young growth of many tender perennial plants — such as salvias, strobilanthes, and durantas — is soft and herbaceous, turning woodier in time. You'll probably learn more about insects, too, as you monitor your plants and keep them healthy. In their second season, they will be ready to create an altogether different and dramatic effect in the garden.



'Blackie' sweet potato vine (*Ipomoea batatas* 'Blackie') helps fill out the summer garden when other perennials are on the wane.

#### **FILL IN THE GAPS**

Many tender plants bloom during those famous gaps in the hardy-perennial bloom cycle. Tender salvias, daturas, and tibouchinas: these and other plants kick in just when most of the perennial border is giving up the ghost. You may be surprised at how much more interesting the August/September garden is when tender perennials are added to your plantings. Their contributions don't necessarily end with the first frost, either. In the chapters that follow, we will show you how to grow and save your favorite plants, and in many cases, how you can continue to enjoy their beauty even through the coldest months of winter.

Who wouldn't want a room full of sweet-smelling flowering plants to enjoy in the dead of winter? No matter where you live, and no matter what your budget, if you choose carefully and consider realistically the conditions of your living space, you'll be pleasantly surprised by the possibilities of your own indoor winter paradise.

#### **Container Combinations**

Probably the first way most of us think of planting tender perennials is to combine several in one container. When considering mixed containers, first take into account the cultural requirements of each plant, and then combine plants that will be happy in similar conditions. Contemplate their light requirements and whether they prefer moist or dry soil. Combining plants that will be happy in similar conditions greatly simplifies the care of the whole container, and will also help to ensure that it is a successful one.



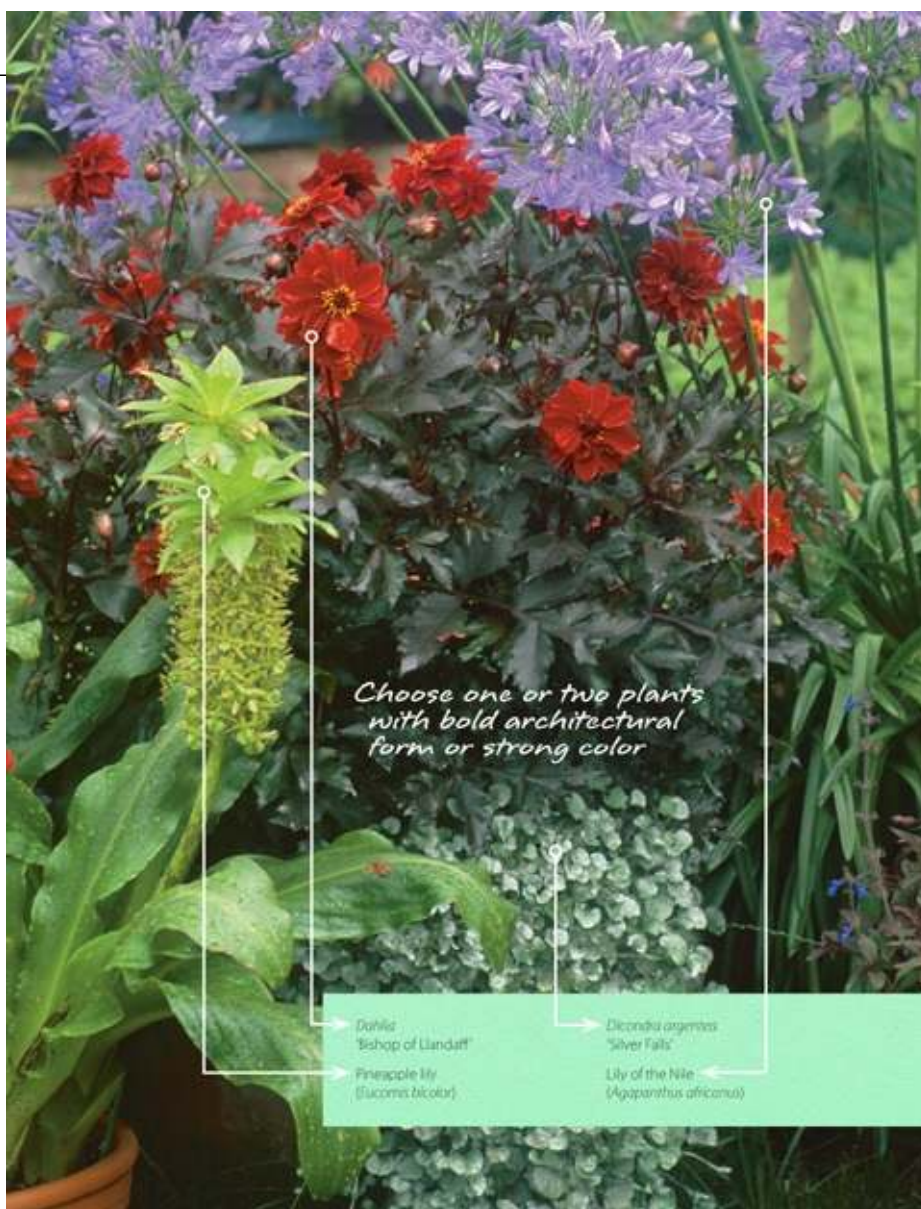
Backed by the strappy foliage of lily-of-the-Nile (*Agapanthus*), *Cuphea cyanea* and *Helichrysum argyrophyllum* 'Moe's Gold' are the perfect combination for the gray-green patina of this tall urn.

### **Choosing Partners**

The most obvious thing to consider when you place multiple plants in a single container is how they combine from a visual perspective. Place them side by side and see how they look together. Often, the texture of a plant's foliage is just as important to the success of a combination as its flower or leaf color. Another consideration is the shape and scale of each plant element. It is generally good to have a balance of taller and shorter plants, some with large leaves and others that are more delicate, and to include both colorful and less strident elements. If your plants are already in bloom, you can easily gauge how your selections will appear in a shared space throughout the season. If they're not in bloom, do your research and try to imagine the flower color as part of the composition. This is usually more challenging, but if the foliar combination is a good one, you can probably pull it off.

### **Design Considerations**

Perhaps you'd like to have something hang over one edge of your container. Remember to balance large-leaved plants with those that are more finely textured. Some variation in height also makes combinations more interesting. It may help you to choose one or two plants with bold architectural form or a strong color. Then fill in the spaces with others that contrast and complement them.



*Dahlia* 'Bednall Beauty', potted up with *Dichondra argentea*, serves as a colorful neighbor for the unusual chartreuse blooms of pineapple lily (*Eucomis*) and lily-of-the-Nile (*Agapanthus*).



Sue Webel's terrace garden at Idyll Haven shows how a gathering of solo plantings can create an entire outdoor living area.

Your container design should also take into account the pot itself. What type of container is it? What influence does its size and color have on your selection of plants? Will the pot be viewed from all sides or just from the front? Also consider the weight of the container. Filled with soil, it will become much heavier. This is especially critical if you're planning eventually to move the entire thing inside. Lightweight plastic, which is now available in some surprisingly attractive forms, could be your best option.

Experiment with unusual containers when planting tender perennials. We don't always remember that hanging baskets often make a good home. And in the sun, some of the more prostrate abutilons and kalanchoes are ideal for basket culture. In the shade, there are bromeliads and the more recumbent begonias. All kinds of out-of-the-ordinary containers can be used to house your tender perennials, and how you place them can be arresting. Hang some on an exterior wall of your house or place them along lower freestanding walls in the yard. Have fun!

Pay attention to individual plant requirements. Remember that if all the plants in a container are drought tolerant, you may be able to plant them in a relatively shallow container. But if you're situating a thirsty banana or canna, you'd better choose a large, deep pot and fill it with plenty of rich soil mix.

These are all questions to consider as you put together a combination container. Just remember that there is no one right answer. Have fun with this opportunity to create a combination that is uniquely pleasing to you.



Here, the annual *Verbena × hybrida* weaves together tender perennial participants, including a pelargonium and *Phormium tenax* 'Atropurpureum'.

### **The Solo Specimen Approach**

Another approach to growing tender perennials — one that has become quite popular in recent years — is to place each one alone in its own container. Situated singly as a specimen, one plant to a pot, a tender perennial such as an agave or a begonia can make a handsome, simple statement. The container you choose to plant it in can complement the plant's color or shape or even a relatively small detail like the pattern along the edge of its leaves. When selecting a container for a plant that has prominent or long-lasting blooms, do take the flower color into account as well.

Color combinations can emphasize contrast — you can place silver foliage against deep brown- or red-glazed containers, for instance — or they can complement more subtle harmonies. Not only can you work with the glazes and textures of container surfaces, but the actual shape of a container can emphasize different characteristics of the plant as well. For example, a long trough can be planted with something that trails down its elegant sides, like dichondra, or it can house something more upright, even a standard. Sometimes the simple texture of a plain terra-cotta pot is the perfect way to showcase a plant. A funkier, more eye-catching container will highlight that same plant in an entirely different manner.

Grouping these containers is a great way to create visually compelling areas on your patio or in the garden. The contrast of tall, upright specimens with wider, shorter, or more trailing plants will invite garden visitors to examine each one more closely. Groups of containers can create a new garden area on their own. Don't forget to consider the containers, as well as the plants, in combination. Some contrast — between light- and dark-colored containers, smooth and rough surfaces, even tall and short or round and square shapes — will keep things interesting. Sometimes a variation in the height at which containers are displayed, such as that created by placing some on top of flat rocks or low table



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