



# FESTIVE FALL & WINTER CONTAINERS

Arkansas Gardener

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With the cooler temperatures and the changing of the seasons, I know most of you just can't wait to give your potted containers a fresh look. In keeping with my philosophy of never being typical, I have a few tips to pass along that will make your front porch and/or patio burst with color and texture this fall and winter.

**Story and photos by Chris Olsen**

Never limit yourself! So many gardeners make the mistake and think they are limited in plant selection for the cooler seasons. I could write a book (maybe I will) on the vast assortment of flowering plants, shrubs and deciduous and evergreen trees that can add total interest to any container. In fact, it is not only the plant selection that can make a big difference; it is also the use of different planting techniques. A combo of both will end in awesome results. And awesome results is what we should all strive to obtain.

Don't be afraid to try a different combination of plants. Break your routine and take some chances. Usually (not always) your plant selection will work out just fine. If not, then start over. It's that simple!!

Most of us think for fall and winter color, we are limited to only seasonal color – pansies, ornamental cabbages and kale, Swiss chard and snapdragons are what most of us plant. You will be so amazed and thrilled to learn that these plants are just the tip of the iceberg.

First and foremost, let's start with shrub selection. All of the shrub suggestions that I am about to share with you are perennial; thus saving you not only time but money. And we all can use more money.... I love to use perennial shrubs and then each spring just add some annuals and tropicals for immediate color and filler.

Some of my favorite evergreen shrubs to use are the golden euonymus 'Aureo Marginata', mahonias, purple fringe (*Loropetalum chinensis* var. *rubrum* 'Hines Purpleleaf'), variegated boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens* 'Variegata'), various Hinoki cypress, 'Rainbow' and 'Scarletta' *Leucothoe* (*Leucothoe* r. 'Scarletta' and *Leucothoe* f. 'Rainbow') and various varieties of *Skimmia*. The majority of these shrubs will live in most states. So what more could you want?

Most of us are very familiar with the different varieties of *Euonymus*. Very much an old-fashioned shrub, the golden euonymus is my favorite. You can't beat that vibrant yellow color. I love this plant so much that I planted several of these in majority of my pots last year. For the first time in my life, I did not even replace these plants with new plants in the spring. They still look so great!! The only disadvantage to this great shrub is that they can be rather buggy and black mildew tends to be attracted to them. So I just spray once in spring with Triple Action Plus by Ferti-lome and then a second application in July. That's it!

Of course purple fringe is very common. But we usually don't think about using this

plant in pots. Why not? There are so many different hybrids of the loropetalum. Some grow tall and some like the 'Purple Pixie' are more like a ground cover. This variety is perfect as a border plant in large containers. Their deep purple foliage looks fantastic mixed with lime green plants.

If you never have grown a *Leucothoe*, then I feel so sorry for you. *Leucothoe* are wonderful, easy and colorful. You will have to try the 'Scarletta'. This plant will turn deep blood scarlet after the first frost. And don't forget about the 'Rainbow' *Leucothoe* either. 'Rainbow' is a great variegated shrub. Silver white all year, its new growth is Valentine-red that soon turns to white. In the winter these shrubs can tolerate full sun but in the summer they can even thrive in a dark shady area. Shade is their preference.

Of course, you can't do without the leatherleaf mahonia (*Mahonia aquifolium*) also known as the Oregon grape holly. Believe it or not, this shrub is not a holly at all – just looks somewhat like one. The Oregon grape holly is another example of a forgotten old-time plant. But it's time for its rebirth...I love its texture and grayish foliage. The leaves are sharp but it will keep the kids and cats away...If you know what I mean...If you want a contemporary look for your pots, then this is the plant for you.

*Skimmia* is another easy-to-grow evergreen. Part shade is what it likes. But in the South it will tolerate full sun in the winter. There are so many different varieties. Just chose the one that grabs your attention. But if you have to know, my favorite is *Skimmia japonica*. With its lush dark green and shiny foliage, *Skimmia japonica*'s leaves reflect the sunshine. In winter, this shrub will be covered in plump red berries. What a plus!!!

**An emerald green arborvitae is the center of attention. For fluff the tropical zebra plant and the paddle plant (two extremes.....one tropical and one desert), top off the look. ▼**



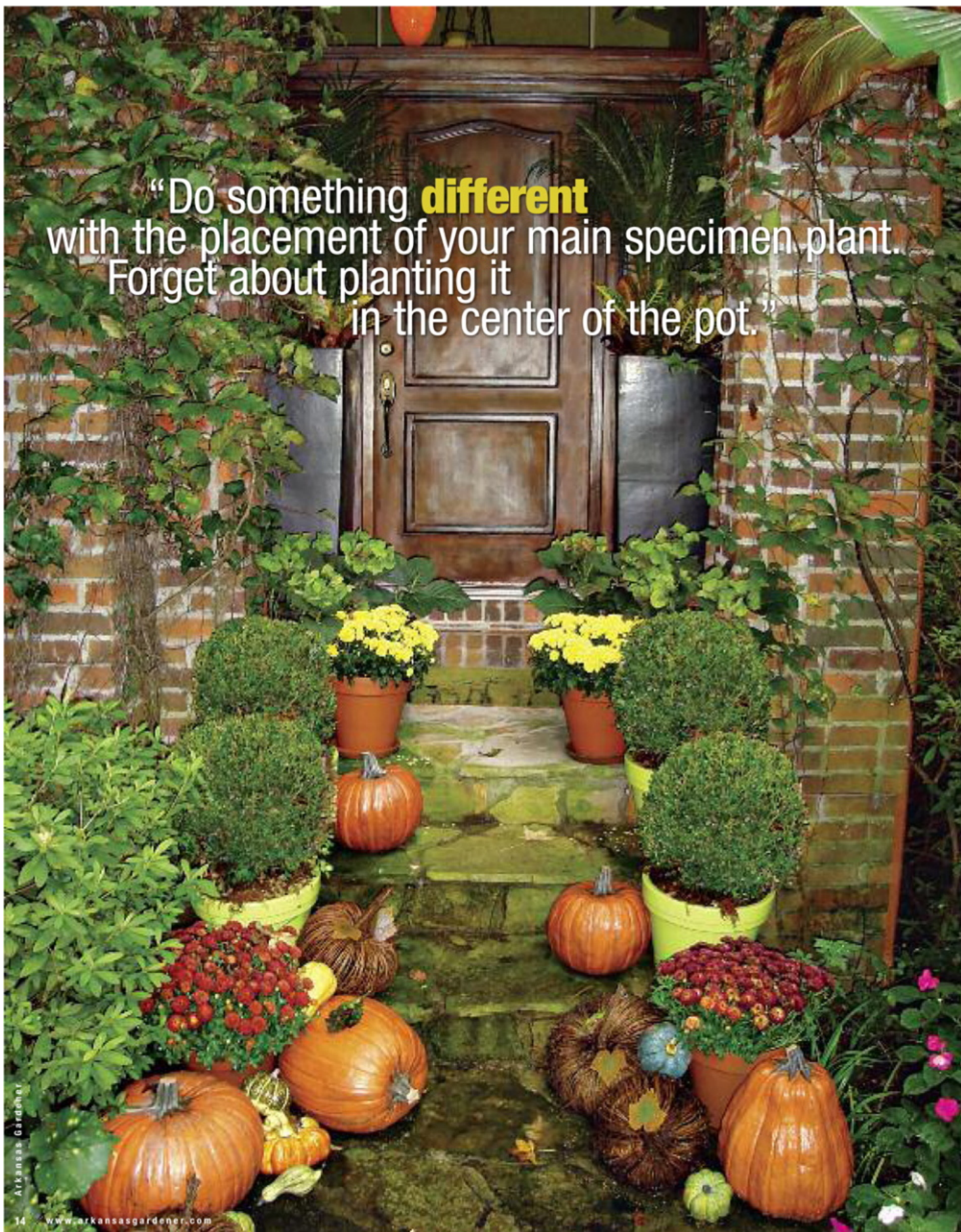
**Simple but colorful, a sky pencil holly and the golden euonymus are all it takes to make bold impact and visual stimulation. ▼**



**Opposite page:**  
A mixture of different colorful and textured plants will transform any container into something delightful. For fall mix in the red cordyline, paddle plant (*Kalanchoe triflora*), assorted coleus and for that extra kick, an ornamental pepper. In this container, I used hay as a bottom filler.



“Do something **different** with the placement of your main specimen plant. Forget about planting it in the center of the pot.”



All of the shrubs above are ideal anchor plants. Anchor plants are usually the bigger plants. If you are looking for taller plants, then you may want to consider such evergreens as the dwarf Alberta spruce (*Picea glauca albertiana* 'Conica'), Hinoki false cypress and the 'Little Gem' magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora* 'Little Gem'). All three are easy plants to grow and if you have a real dark covered porch then, for sure, plant the Alberta spruce. The 'Little Gem' magnolia and the Hinoki cypress like shade but will grow in full sun if watered. All three trees will last year after year.

If you want a funky look for a specimen tree in your pots, use the Hinoki false cypress. There are so many different varieties. Some short and some tall. The slender Hinoki false cypress (*Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Gracilis'), is tall and very contorted. I even have a friend who is using one as a Christmas tree this year. You talk about something different...The Hinoki false cypress is easy to grow and will last for years in a large container.

I always like to add a little drama to my plantings. So, what if instead, you planted a deciduous tree. Yes, I know there will be no leaves during the winter months, but the a twiggy look would be a great element of surprise. This year, I am planting birch trees in some of my clients' containers. I am using the Fox Valley river birch (*Betula nigra* 'Fox Valley Reg.'). This river birch is semi-bush and semi-tree. It has a very full look. Drape them with white lights; you now have a more dramatic look.

Another deciduous tree is the Harry Lauder's walking stick (*Corylus avellana* 'Contorta'). So cool.....I am sure you have seen this tree somewhere, but as a container plant, this plant rules.....It looks great dressed in foliage but in the winter, you really appreciate the wild design of its naked branches. The Harry Lauder's walking stick is like a piece of art. A sculpture created by Mother Nature herself. I think this tree looks better with less companion plants. The focus should be on the tree.

If you fill your containers with an assortment of these perennial plants, all you have to add are a few fillers. In the fall, add some tropical crotons. With their orange, burgundy and yellow leaves, you have captured the essence of fall.

Don't forget your ornamental peppers, assorted succulents such as various *Echeveria*, also pansies, panolas, violas, Dusty Miller and of course variegated ivy. A combo of all or some will surely stop your guest in their tracks.



▲ The copper plant and mixed succulents are all it takes to look like fall.



▲ For low maintenance, mix blue rug juniper with golden euonymus for years of enjoyment



▲ The dwarf Hinoki cypress is soft and delicate looking but a very hardy shrub for a semi-shady container.



▲ The tropical crotons come in an assortment of flavors for any appetite.

Remember, I stated in the beginning of this article that certain planting techniques are just as important as plant selection. If you really want to be unique and different, then do what I do.....I plant a pot within a pot. What do I mean? I first select two complementary containers. One at least twice the size of the other one. Then I plant the smaller container first. I take the smaller planted pot and slightly bury it into the soil of the larger pot. Finally I plant the larger container. You may want the placement of the smaller size at a slight angle. As though it is falling over. Now you have an awesome display. Different yes.....but definitely very eye-catching.....

Here is another tip...Do something different with the placement of your main specimen plant. Forget about planting it in the center of the pot. Go ahead and place it in the back of the pot to the right or left of the center. Then staircase your plants towards the audience. You end up with a living floral arrangement.

I hope you're ready to head out to your local garden center. If you still are not sure of the plant selection for your pots, then bring to your local garden center, the measurements of your containers. Their garden experts can help you pick out the perfect combination of plants to enhance your outdoor living.

Happy Gardening! 🌿

*Chris Olsen is the owner and landscape designer of Botanica Gardens. He is also a local TV personality. Check out his two new national DVDs at [botanicagardens.com](http://botanicagardens.com). For more information on Chris go to [chrisholsen.com](http://chrisholsen.com).*

**Opposite page:** Dress up your front door. An assortment of lacecap hydrangea (once blue flowers and now faded to green), wintergreen boxwoods, fall mums, 'Petra' crotons and the date palm added with pumpkins and gourds, says WELCOME!!!

