

Native Containers

BY JOHN FRIEL

America the Beautiful —Contained

A famous bible quote goes, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own country.” Substitute “native plant” for “prophet,” and you’re pretty close to the chronic and lamentable neglect of America’s indigenous flora by American gardeners and growers.

In Europe, our natives are rock stars. At home, they’re like Rodney Dangerfield: they get no respect. Even specialists often focus on their utility, or on esoteric ephemerals. Native grasses like andropogon and schizachyrium are go-to choices for restoring damaged soils. Trilliums and trout lilies wow nature lovers. But in commerce, the words “pretty” and “native” are too rarely coupled.

Fortunately for growers, gardeners and environmentalists, there’s a rising tide of awareness that homegrown can also be beautiful. Natives work as well in your portable landscapes—mixed containers—as in the garden.

Pamela Straub is the in-house design diva at Emerald Coast Growers, a propagator of ornamental grasses and perennials in Pensacola. Her mixed

containers, brilliantly incorporating natives and non-natives, get raves from visitors to ECG’s booth at the OFA Short Course.

“I approach all mixed containers with a few general ideas: What is sellable? What culturally works together? How can I use easily available materials in different ways?” she shares. “The general effect I have in mind can be modern, classic or dramatic. But I’m always trying to incorporate natives.”

So how can you hit Pamela’s success? Read on for a few stars that always shine in containers; then see the sidebar for a selection of Pamela’s own custom-designed recipes.

Perennials

Echinacea almost goes without saying in any discussion of native plants. Established forms like Ruby Star work great in jumbo containers, and the steady stream of new varieties entering the trade includes smaller, heavier-flowering types like Prairie Splendor suitable for less massive applications.

Lewisia cotyledon (bitterroot) epitomizes plants that get more respect abroad than at home. In Europe, it’s a dual-purpose “windowsill-to-garden” plant for small (4.5-in./12-cm) pots. Despite its diminutive size (6 to 12 in.), it’s tough, with show-stopping striped flowers, mostly pastels, rising from neat



Lewisia Rainbow Mix

rosettes of semi-succulent leaves. Sow late in the year; cold enhances germination. Alternatively, play it safer with liners. At trade shows, a flowering tray literally stops traffic in the aisle.

Lewisia’s namesake, explorer Captain Meriwether Lewis, found it growing in scree at high altitudes. That’s a good cultural indicator: Water sparingly, and use well-drained media. Those characteristics make it a good

candidate to incorporate into mixed succulent containers, possibly even for green roofs.

Gaura lindheimeri is a relative newcomer to cultivation beyond its native Southwest. In perennial borders, the wispy, sprawling habit of the species make it a wonderful see-through “scrim” plant to weave through sturdier perennials. But those 3-ft. whips are tough to contain.

Newer selections are bred for compact size, dense, pot-filling >>>

Native Containers



Gaura lindheimeri Bijou Butterflies

habit, and a range of foliage and flower colors. Designers will delight in Bijou Butterflies (12 in.) and Passionate Blush and Crimson Butterflies (each 18 to 24 in.) for long flowering performance alone or in the center of a combo.

How do you say heuchera? Europeans say HOY-ker-uh, not HYOO-ker-uh, because it's named for botanist Johann von Heucher, pronounced HOY-ker. By any name, Heuchera is a true American genus, with dozens of species across the continent.

Crosses involving *H. villosa*, *H. americana* and *H. sanguinea* have produced an amazing assortment of colors and forms. Foliage may be solid, from brilliant chartreuse to inky

black, or multicolored with wild splashes, shiny silver patches, or subtle speckles. Leaves range from nearly round to broad, dentate and deeply ruffled.

Phlox is so ubiquitous, we forget it's indigenous to the eastern U.S. *P. paniculata* is called "tall phlox," but includes shorter varieties perfect for large containers. Laura can be kept under 3 ft. with a pinch. Becky Towe is naturally short, just 20 to 30 in., and her creamy variegated leaves sustain interest even when the pink flowers are absent.

Not short enough? The cheerful spring flowers of *P. subulata* are notoriously fleeting, but the soft pine-needle-like foliage remains attractive year-round. Which brings us to ...

Grasses

In a pot, *P. subulata* makes a fine understory for *Eragrostis elliottii*, a blue-green, narrow-bladed grass native to Georgia and the Carolinas. "Love grass" forms graceful mounds topped with delicate tan flowers in summer.



Nassella tenuissima's fine-textured plumes are a graceful sight during breezy days.

Most showy carex species are imports, like *C. glauca* (Europe and Africa) and *C. buchananii* (New Zealand). One exception is *C. muskingumensis* Oehme, which features green blades with chartreuse edges.

Its short stature, under 24 in., makes it versatile enough for medium to large containers.

Nassella tenuissima, (18 to 24 in.) formerly *Stipa*, is really getting around. Last year's Symposium of the Perennial >>>

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Native Containers

Plant Association toured numerous gardens and garden centers, and nassella was everywhere, in containers and/or the landscape. Deceptively delicate-looking, with fine-textured plumes dancing in the slightest breeze, it tolerates harsh, dry conditions.

Many panicum (Switch grass) varieties bring cool blues to the landscape, but Ruby Ribbons ups the ante with wine red blades that deepen through the growing season. It's a bold vertical accent (3 to 4 ft.) for big pots in full sun.

American consumers are highly motivated to buy American, but don't hesitate to mix nationalities as well as forms, colors and textures. Create your own definition of "melting pot." In this nation of immigrants, we may not honor our prophets, but we're always ready to pledge allegiance to profits.

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John Friel is President Elect of the Perennial Plant Association and marketing manager for Emerald Coast Growers.

Pamela's Magic

Pamela Straub, resident design diva at Emerald

Coast Growers, shares the secrets behind her show-stopping combo designs. Whether natives take center stage or steal the show in a supporting role, it's definitely time to go native!

Panicum virgatum Ruby Ribbons (native), *Echinacea purpurea* Ruby Star (native), *Gaura lindheimeri* Crimson Butterflies (native), *Carex glauca* Blue Zinger



"I wanted to really highlight the purple hues of the Panicum Ruby Ribbons by adding the echinacea with its rose-purple flowers. I also wanted to illustrate natives being ornamental. As a bonus, I think the blue-gray foliage of the carex offers a nice contrast, and is a bit unexpected."

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"This one is a more modern presentation with the understated green color throughout. Its subject is the contrasting texture: The fine blades of the carex juxtaposed next to the larger leaved ajuga. The verbena offers another leaf texture and adds an attractive, soft white flower."



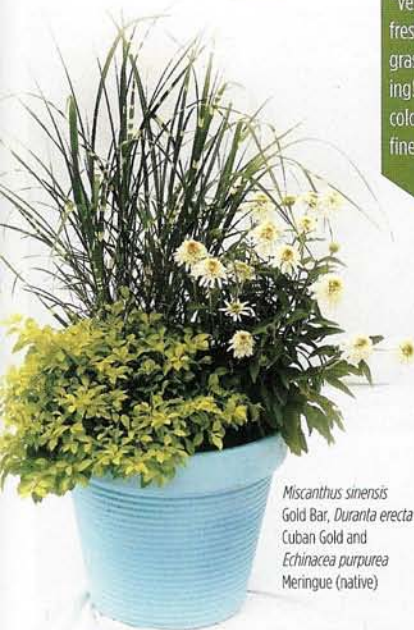
Carex buchananii Green Twist,
Verbena Snowflurry (native), *Ajuga*

"Let the shape of the container inspire you. This low, round, open bowl shape has an old-fashioned feel. I wanted to saturate it with foliage and small blooms. I used a more monochromatic approach to make it a bit more updated."



Heliotropium amplexicaule Azure
Skies (native), *Perovskia Little Spires*

"Very available, miscanthus Gracillimus looks new and fresh in this mixed container. Mix it up: two fine bladed grasses, one green and upright, one bronze and cascading! Flower color can call attention to more subtle grass color: Bright gold rudbeckia flowers help bring out the fine bronze foliage of the carex."



Miscanthus sinensis
Gold Bar, *Duranta erecta*
Cuban Gold and
Echinacea purpurea
Meringue (native)



Miscanthus sinensis Gracillimus, *Carex flagellifera* Toffee Twist, *Rudbeckia hirta* Tiger Eye Gold (native), *Coreopsis Moonbeam* (native)

"Typical combinations use high-contrasting plants, like golds with reds and purples. I wanted to pair gold and green. The gold foliage of duranta with the gold stripes on the miscanthus. Bright yellow centers on the echinacea tie in the theme. Again, a monochromatic scheme suggests a modern look."



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