**Primetime**

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Thursday, August 9, 2012

**“Containers for the Fall and Beyond”**

There are several good reasons to decide to garden in containers. Among the best is that container gardening allows a person with limited space a gardening option. Container gardening also can provide major impact with minimal water use.

If you are considering container gardening make an initial assessment of what you want to accomplish with the effort and also determine what space is available and what are the conditions inherent with that space, particularly how much light is available. You can garden with containers in the shade but your plant choice needs to be different.

The classic container plants for use in full sun in the San Antonio area are bougainvillea and hibiscus. Both are cold sensitive in addition to requiring full sun.

Bougainvilleas are available in reds, pinks, lavenders, and white, there are even variegated versions. The easiest to grow are the pink and red varieties such as Barbara Karst. All bougainvilleas are cyclical bloomers. The best bloomers provide color for six weeks at a time and then drop the colored bracts for three to four weeks while they reload.

Bougainvilleas are unusual in that they bloom best when they are root-bound and must dry out between watering. Keep the tops of bougainvilleas pruned to a crown about two and a half times the size of the container. Fertilize bougainvilleas with granular hibiscus food or soluble fertilizer products such as a Peters, Schultz or Miracle-Gro.

Oriental hibiscus has shiny-green leaves. You can select between flower colors of red, pink, white, orange or yellow. There are some bicolor flowers. A plant about two and a half feet tall can be grown in a container that is 16 to 18 inches in diameter (about three gallons). The reds and pinks bloom the best.

Hibiscus requires more water than bougainvillea. Irrigate them when the surface of the pot dries to one inch deep. Like bougainvillea, hibiscus should be watered thoroughly when you water. The water should soak the whole root ball and run out the drip hole.

Fertilize with soluble container formulas or granular hibiscus food as per the instructions on the container.

Bougainvillea and hibiscus will bloom until temperatures drop to about 40º F. This is usually about Thanksgiving. They then need to be moved into a freeze protected winter environment. Hibiscus requires light, such as that provided by a greenhouse to survive the winter. Continue to water hibiscus in the winter. Bougainvilleas do not require light. They can be stacked up in a garage or similar dark space to be retrieved about April 1 when the weather warms again.

For the shade, I consider pentas the best blooming plant to grow in containers. They are a constant bloomer until Thanksgiving when cool weather overcomes them. They can be over wintered like hibiscus but often are just deposited in the compost pile when they quit blooming in the fall. Pentas are very showy with red, white, pink, or lavender flowers. Pentas are special because they are very attractive to butterflies and hummingbirds. The nectar feeders will come onto the patio to take advantage of the blooms.

Firespike is also a plant to consider for containers in the shade.

Pentas will bloom from April until December, firespike only blooms in the fall. It will prosper in deep shade to produce spikes of red tubular flowers that are also favored by hummingbirds.