**Weekly Express-News Article**

**By Calvin R. Finch, PhD, SAWS Director, and Horticulturist**

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**“The Easy Way to Garden”**

Do you have an interest or need to garden but can’t afford the time and/or water costs for a full-scale effort? Consider container gardening. One option is to convert your regular landscape to a low maintenance, low water use xeriscape dominated by hardscape, ground covers, perennials, shrubs, and trees. Rely on a limited number of container plants for extra blooms and seasonal color.

Visit the SAWS website at [www.saws.org](http://www.saws.org) for more information on xeriscape landscapes or seek out my columns on the topic at “www.mysanantonio.com” or “[www.plantanswers.com](http://www.plantanswers.com)”.

With four months of mild weather left, consider the traditional container plants for the rest of the summer to be followed by the winter annuals.

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 such as a Peters, Schultz or Miracle-Gro.

Oriental hibiscus has shiny-green leaves and blooms in 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 irrigate. 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 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.

Firebush is another great plant to use in a container in full sun. In a three-gallon container, it makes globe-shaped crowns about two and a half feet in diameter.

The leaves of firebush have a red hue and the globe is covered with small red tubular flowers that are a favorite hummingbird nectar source. When the first significant cold wave moves through in November, the foliage turns purple-red. It is so popular with the hummingbirds that during the fall migration period, you can expect the toughest bird at any one time to dominate the firebush after an ongoing series of entertaining aerial dogfights.

For the shade, I consider pentas as 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 attractive 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 a stalk of red tubular flowers that are also favored by hummingbirds.