**Primetime**

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

Wednesday, February 15, 2012

**Container Gardens**

Expand your use of containers. It is a great way to make your landscape more unique and to fit better into your lifestyle. The obvious motivation of container gardening is a lack of space for raised beds or regular plantings in the soil but consider these ideas as well.

* Containers offer the opportunity to provide the soil that is most suitable for a particular desirable plant.

The obvious examples are the acid loving plants. It is nearly impossible to grow blueberries in our alkaline soil but they do very well in a large container with a half potting soil, half sphagnum peat mix. The same situation exists for gardenias, camellias, and even azaleas.

* Containers allow use of vertical space for its advantages in display in adding to efficiency in using limited space.

Hanging baskets displaying petunias, New Guinea impatiens, purslane, or bougainvillea are very showy. There are many choices for full sun, full shade, or partial sun. A hanging basket in San Antonio can have color 12 months of the year by replacing summer plants with cool weather plants.

* Containers allow that plants that are attractive to birds or butterflies can be placed in more opportune positions for easy observation of the birds and butterflies.

Firebush and pentas come to mind but there are many choices. Firebush makes a compact attractive shrub for full sun in the summertime. Penta is shade tolerant and very attractive to both butterflies and hummingbirds from late spring to late fall.

* Containers can be used to control the spread of plants that are desirable in small quantities but can be invasive. A good example is mint. It will take over a raised bed garden but in a 10 inch pot it is attractive and provides all the leaves that a family needs for flavoring drinks and food.
* Plants growing in containers are often easier to manage than vegetable gardens or flower beds. They are a good choice for individuals too busy to manage a full garden, or someone with a limited budget for water.

This use of container grown plants is especially important in droughts when it is prudent to reduce large plantings in beds in favor of fewer showy plants in containers placed at key points in the landscape. Cyclamen in containers in shaded locations near the driveway or hibiscus in clusters in full sun in the summer make a major impact but require less water and attention.

* Containers will dwarf plants to make them more manageable if they have to be moved into shelter from cold or wind.

Bougainvilleas, hibiscus, and plumeria prosper in warm weather in a container but must be moved to shelter in the winter. Citrus stay small in containers and are easier to protect from the cold.

* Containers are a controlled environment for delicate plants that do not display to their full potential in the soil or are not competitive with weeds, insects or even other garden plants.

Primula and other slug and snail magnets are easier to protect from the pests in a container than the flower bed. They are also small plants that are less likely to be overwhelmed in a container than a bed. Johnny jump-ups, pansies, and moss roses, and other low growing plants can be difficult to keep weeded in the flower bed but are easy to keep weed free in a container. Even spreading plants like petunias are easier to keep weed free in a container. Herbs and vegetables can also be easier to manage in a container.