

Spread the Cheer

WINTER CONTAINERS CAN PROVIDE SEVERAL MONTHS OF ENJOYMENT WITH A SOLID EVERGREEN BASE AND THE ADDITION OF NEW ACCESSORIES EACH MONTH.

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Imagine your favorite classic dress – the one you like to wear for all sorts of occasions. Add pearls and high heels, and it's fancy. Throw on a snappy short jacket with big jewelry, grab a clever bag—and the look is jaunty. Accessories work hard to spiff up the basics. That's why Jennifer Brennan, the Chalet Garden Center's Horticulture Information Specialist, likes to use them to keep outdoor containers looking fresh and varied from November harvest through March winds.

She starts with what she considers the ideal planting medium—topsoil. "It's heavy and dense enough to hold moisture, so it will freeze solid, keeping things in place," says Brennan. She creates the structure of the planting with six different winter evergreens, each with its own shape, shade, and texture. It's the classic dress, so to speak. Here's how to do it:

CREATE THE BASE FOR YOUR WINTER CONTAINER



What you will need: A spruce top, white pine tips, Douglas fir, Port Orford cedar, incense cedar and blueberry cedar.



1. Spruce Top

Start by sticking a spruce top at least six inches into the soil to give them a good foothold. A rule of thumb is to select a spruce top that is twice the height of your container for proper balance. Brennan suggests you "open them like an umbrella and gently push the branches down. The open branches seem to embrace visitors and say, 'Welcome. Look at me!'" Put a total of three spruce tops around the container. *(Steps continued on page 18.)*



The basic black dress of outdoor decorating is the lushly planted container with a variety of greens. Build on this solid foundation throughout the winter months by adding and subtracting accents from twigs, berries, sparkles, ribbons—what you will.

CREATE THE BASE FOR YOUR WINTER CONTAINER Continued



2. White Pine Tips

Next stick the white pine tips a good two inches into the soil. Let the first one drape into the spruce top so you can see its softer texture contrasted against the spruce. Have your pruning shears handy so you can trim shorter pieces off the longer branches. Use the shorter pieces to make a kind of skirt around the edge. "When you cut, never leave a stump exposed—cut it to the base of the branch," cautions Brennan. "Then ease off, step back, and take a look at your container. Be sure to leave space for other greenery."



3. Douglas Fir

Brennan cuts off a piece from a long Douglas fir branch and inserts it as close to the trunk as possible. "The Douglas fir can be challenging because it has some wild branches. But I love the color—darker green on one side, lighter on the other; so I try to vary its direction so you get to see both colors."



4. Port Orford Cedar

"Port Orford cedar is one of my favorites," says Brennan, adding another green—again, two inches deep. "I love the citrusy smell, and the texture is like ostrich plumes, creating a feathery chartreuse background, introducing a kind of golden color." Cutting off smaller branches, she places some backwards to show a different texture.



5. Incense Cedar

Adding incense cedar, with its gently draping nature, widens the focal point. "Its golden berries make it great for a harvest container, but I love to leave it in for Christmas." She cuts off several pieces to insert into the skirt around the edge.



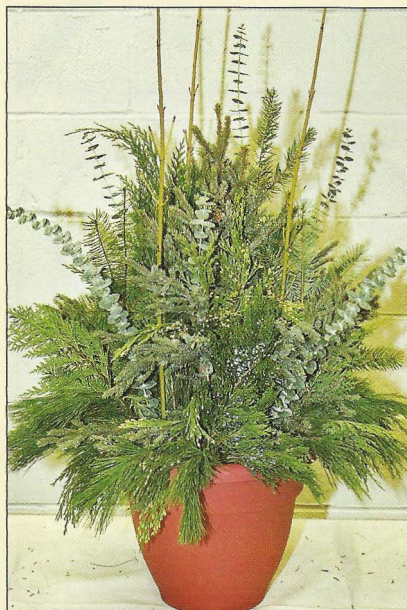
6. Blueberry Cedar

Last comes the blueberry cedar. Sticking the blueberry-laden branch deeply into the center—right against the incense cedar—creates a beautiful mix of blue against yellow. Now you're ready to add the "accessories" that change the "outfit" over the next five months.

Now you are ready to adapt your container for all the winter holidays. >>

TIPS

- Before starting, coat your hands with your favorite lotion. When you wash your hands after planting, the sap will come right off. (Or wear gloves).
- Have pruning shears and wire-cutters on hand. Only use the wire cutters for cutting wire.
- Polyurethane containers are best to withstand freezing and thawing cycles.
- If some of the accessories you want to replace become frozen into the soil, just pour enough boiling water around their base to release them.
- Good design points to keep in mind: find a focal point; stick with odd numbers, especially in the accessories. Outward-facing branches act as a kind of greeting. Place materials in all 4 quadrants to get balance.
- Think of contrast for interest among the varied branches: light next to dark; softer texture next to firmer.
- Make the back of the container nice too so you can see it as you exit as well as enter the house.
- As a final touch, spray the branches of your creation with "Wilt-Pruf" to hold the needles in place, even if they dry out.
- If your greens are starting to look a little saggy or brown, think about purchasing fresh ones at a local garden store.



Fall Harvest

Add yellow twig dogwood, lotus pods, and eucalyptus.

Three yellow twig dogwood stems should be enough, especially if they're multi-branched. The rule of thumb is 2/3 plant material, 1/3 container. "The bright yellow dogwood really carries the color of the incense cedar up," Brennan aims some twigs a little forward to get depth and inserts each at a slightly different height to add interest.

Again, three lotus pods will work just fine. A general principal is to use odd numbers of accessories—three or five. She cuts the lotus pod stems to go deep into the container, positioning some near the base, lifting others up.

Eucalyptus: Stripping the leaves off the bottom allows the eucalyptus to stick into the soil firmly. Its arching aspect adds graceful lines to the arrangement and the blue color echoes in the blueberry cedar and silver background of the Douglas fir.



Christmas

Pull out the harvest accessories, replacing the golden twig dogwood with red twig, "maybe going a little taller to add some pop," suggests Brennan. When you cut the stems to get the height you want, save the bottoms so you can "stage" some pinecones. Either buy pre-wired pinecones or simply wrap some florist wire around the base of each cone and then wire it to one of the dogwood stems. Now you can twist the cones downward on the wire so they look like they're hanging off the branches. "They're fun because you can position them both high and low," says Brennan. Add more red with winterberry, also known as deciduous holly. The bright round, red berries create a burst of holiday color.

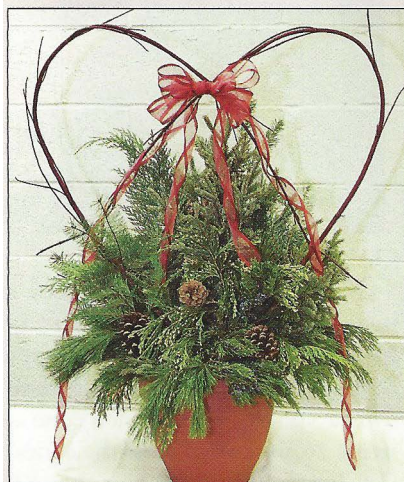


New Year's Eve & Winter

Incorporate white winterberry, white-sprayed birch stems and white-sprayed pinecones.

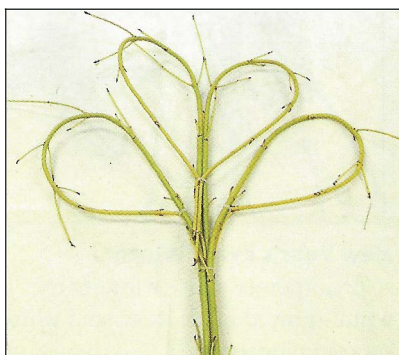
Replace the color of the Christmas container with some silver stems or little crystals that look like ice on stems. "The sparkle is like getting out your good jewelry for a party." Use the white-sprayed birch branches or white winterberry in place of the red winterberry, and exchange the sprayed pinecones for the plain ones. After the party, replace the sparkle with more white birch branches to keep the container going. (Note: White winterberry is also available as a "permanent" – the new term for artificial plants and stems). >>





Valentine's Day

Update your container for Valentine's month with easy-to-create red-twig dogwood hearts. All you need are some zip ties to hold together the heart shape created from bending the dogwood twigs. You can decorate the hearts by gluing on moss, rosehips, huckleberry or little sprigs of incense cedar, whatever you fancy. Insert deep into the soil.



St. Patrick's Day

Use the same technique as in creating the hearts, but use yellow twig dogwood. Make four half hearts and ziptie them together to create a four-leaf clover. Ta da! Five different looks for each month from November through March, all on the same basic foundation. Whoa! Is it spring already? Time to pick up some pansies and forced bulbs for your containers! 