Growing Evergreens in Containers

Evergreens can be more than just landscape shrubs

Keep color alive in your garden throughout the year with the dramatic look of containerized evergreens. Gardeners today have to utilize every aspect of availability in landscape planning when considering new venues for making versatile, bold statements. This is the opening for evergreens in containers. A wide variety of plant materials may be considered.

Evergreen favorites vary in usage, but the most flexible shrub meets these expectations: small, round, tight upright growth habit. A slower growing relatively compact plant insures longevity in design. Winter hardiness is also a key factor for container evergreens.

Container Selection

Selection of the right container is very important. Types, styles can be functional or aesthetically enhancing. Your choice must provide the proper root environment.

1. ***Concrete***: Concrete planters are extremely durable and may be painted, antiqued or left natural

2. ***Wood***: Wood can be used to create natural planters or planting areas. Planters may be stained, painted or left natural. Unseasoned wood should be treated with a safe preservative.

3. ***Clay/Terra Cotta***: Clay pots are available in many shapes and sizes. They can be found in simple, plain surfaces or ornate intricate designs. Clay pots are porous and "breather". They provide excellent drainage and can be glazed for a more finished look. Terra cotta containers may be damaged by frost in winter.

4. ***Bricks, Concrete Blocks, Stone***: These materials can be used in custom planters. If left without mortar, they could be easily expanded or altered to as situations require.

Container Soil Mixes

Use a commercial soil-less mix formulated for container plants available at your local nursery or garden center. It should provide fast drainage with ample air space but still retain moisture. Garden soils are very heavy and will compact reducing air spaces. They are not suitable for container plants.

Plant Selection

Condo, townhouse and apartment dwellers will find good things do come in small packages in ***dwarf needled conifers***. Diminutive and slow growing, they retain their compact shape with minimal pruning. They are available in a variety of shapes and foliage textures.

Mugo pine, *Pinus mugo mugo*
Globe blue spruce, *Picea pugens* 'Glauca Globosa'
Dense yew, *Taxus media* 'Densiformus'
Blue Star juniper, *Juniperus squamata*
Dwarf Alberta spruce, *Picea glauca*
Meyer juniper, *Juniperus squamata* 'Meyerii'
Pyramid Japanese yew, *Taxus* 'Capitata',
Japanese yew, *Taxus x media* 'Smokestack'
Blue Rug juniper, *Juniperus horizontalis* 'Wiltonii'
Korean boxwood, *Buxus koreana*
Japanese boxwood, *Buxus japonica*
Holly, *Ilex* 'Jersey Male'
Holly, *Ilex* 'Rock Garden'
Holly, *Ilex crenata* 'Sky Pencil'
Juniper, *Juniperus procumbens* 'Green Mound '
Juniper, *Juniperus communis* 'Gold Cone'

Planting and transplanting

When using a lightweight synthetic soil mix, it is a good idea to wet the mix before using it. It is difficult to properly wet a pot filled with dry soil mix. One way of doing this is to add water directly to the plastic bags containing the mix, then knead until the soil mixture is evenly moist. It is beneficial to let the bag sit overnight to allow the moisture to be evenly distributed in the mixture. Fill your container and firm the mix down, especially near the edges. Nursery and greenhouse plants generally are sold in "greenhouse pots," non-ornamental containers. Water these plants as you would any container plant, until you are ready to plant them into your container of choice. It is important not to let your plants dry out before getting a chance to repot them. Most damage to plants occurs during the first few days after bringing them home. Handle them with care and give consideration to light, temperature and moisture levels.

Fertilization

Container evergreens don't require large amounts of fertilizer, but they do need to be fed regularly. Many container gardeners recommend using a weak nutrient solution and fertilizing every other watering. It is important to note that if you choose this method, only 1/5 of the recommended amount of fertilizer specified on the product label for monthly application should be used. For example, if the label recommends 1 tablespoon to a gallon of water, use 1 tablespoon, but dilute the solution by mixing it into 5 gallons of water.

Another popular method of feeding plants is through timed-release fertilizers. These fertilizers release nutrients in small amounts as the plant needs them. Timed-release fertilizers are available in three-month and twelve-month formulas.

Overwintering Plants in Containers

Success in overwintering evergreens in containers hinges on a number of factors some of which you may have little control over. First, the plant needs to be sufficiently cold hardy to withstand root temperatures which will be colder than those encountered by a plant growing in the ground. Be sure and select evergreens that are winter hardy well north of where you are growing them. Secondly, plants in larger pots and containers are usually more successful in overwintering than plants in small containers. Fluctuations in freezing and thawing can lead to root damage and death. This can be more pronounced in smaller pots. One way to overwinter smaller containers is to sink them in the ground or mulch up to their rims. This will help reduce soil temperature fluctuations. It may be impractical to bury large containers due to their size and weight. Thirdly, maintaining the correct moisture levels in the soil over winter is critical. If the container dries out, the plant will desiccate and die. Or, conversely, if the soil stays too wet the roots will rot. Maintaining the proper moisture level is important but can be difficult during warm moist periods in winter. Lastly, evergreens should receive some sun during the winter. Most, except the most hardy, should not be overwintered in full sun but rather where they receive some shade. This location will help reduce moisture evaporation and help protect the soil in the container from going through wide temperature fluctuations due to warming by the sun and nighttime freezing.