

OCTOBER 2026

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## The FALLING FOR FALL Issue

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# PLANTING MAGIC

**As Halloween approaches, Velvet's Melanie Taylor shares practical container planting advice and colourful combinations to bewitch and beguile as the nights draw in...**

I'm so glad I live in a world where there are Octobers," says precocious heroine Anne Shirley in the beloved childhood classic *Anne of Green Gables* by L.M. Montgomery. I echo that wholeheartedly. While I love spring's anticipation, autumn's warm hues and mellow richness draw me outside on short sunny days – or invite me to hunker down cosily indoors.

When summer blooms fade, it feels like the garden is over. Yet containers offer a brilliant second act, bringing light and colour onto our patios, windowsills and balconies throughout autumn and winter.

Grouping pots allows us to dress the garden, swapping them in and out like we'd switch up the accessories on a new dress. We can change arrangements to suit our mood, occasion, or desired atmosphere. Indoors, grouping houseplants creates an instant green gallery rather than a scattered display.

**Preparing pots for autumn planting**  
All plants need a bit of TLC to thrive and those in containers need more. Start by

choosing the right-sized pot for the plants you have – too big and root growth will suffer; too small and they'll quickly become rootbound, stressing the plant and stifling growth.

**Weight and weatherproofing**

Weather resistance and weight are every bit as important as size. Avoid cheap terracotta pots that crack in freezing

position large planters in their permanent homes before you fill and plant them. Save your back with a clever estate gardener trick: plant your display in a shallower, manageable container, then simply nestle it inside the larger one. It's then effortless to lift out spent spring tulips and drop in a fresh pot.

**Container plants hate soggy feet**

Adequate drainage is the secret to preventing waterlogged, frozen soil. Before planting, check you have enough drainage holes, drill more if necessary. Cover those holes with 'corks' – broken pieces of terracotta or large pebbles – to stop the hole filling with wet soil. Be sure to give your plants a good drink before planting – soak them for a few minutes until the root ball is thoroughly

hydrated. Fill your pot with a peat-free compost or potting mix and add grit for extra drainage. Leave a two-inch gap below the top of it to allow for watering. Stand pots on pot feet or old bricks to enable free drainage and increase airflow underneath to prevent fungal diseases and mildew.

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temperatures and opt for frost-proof ones instead.

Modern lightweight fibreglass and resin versions look just like ceramic but are far easier to move once filled.

Remember, wet compost gets incredibly heavy, which is a vital safety consideration for balconies and roof gardens. Always

### Approach internet compost-saving hacks with circumspection

While people love to tell us to fill the bottom of containers with newspaper, cardboard or even empty plastic bottles and drinks cans, these ideas don't always work. Solid materials can block the holes while newspaper and card need shredding so that you don't create a sodden mat that wicks water away from the roots.

A natural alternative is to use twigs, pinecones, dry leaves and pruned stems which add volume and will break down over time. Fill about a third of the pot and place a layer of permeable plant fabric over the top to allow the water to drain through and stop soil falling between the gaps.

### Plant and position for maximum scent

There's nothing nicer than stepping outside the back door on a crisp autumn or winter's morning and being hit with the luscious vanilla scent of Christmas Box *Sarcococca confusa*. Always place scented plants in areas where you will sit or walk past to appreciate them. Plant oils evaporate quickly, so if planted in the back of a border their scent will disappear on the wind.

### Watch for drying winds and falling temperatures

Blustery autumn winds are quite drying, and it won't be long before your container becomes parched. Push your finger an inch or so down to see if the soil is damp or dry and water containers in the morning to give it time to absorb before the frosts come overnight. As temperatures drop, bring tender container plants indoors – into a greenhouse, shed or garage. If that's not possible, wrap the pots in horticultural fleece or reuse bubble-wrap from packaging.

### Add some theatre to your doorstep with dramatic planting combinations

Because plants grow slower in winter, start with mature specimens and pack them tightly for instant impact. Just as you would in a border, think about colour, textures and forms to maximise the effect. A useful design principle is 'Thriller', 'Filler', 'Spiller'. Cast a tall, striking plant in the starring role, with a supporting cast of lower-growing fillers waiting patiently in the wings. Finally add the spillers – the trailing ivy as footlights that spill over the pot edge. Choose plants that have the same requirements for soil and care. Annuals work well if you want to keep changing up your displays, but it's more sustainable to choose hardy perennials that return for a rousing encore every year.

As the days shorten, autumn container planting allows you to direct your own seasonal spectacle. Choose, arrange and edit your plants with care for striking displays that defy the chill and last well into the winter months.

For help designing your own garden, contact Melanie by emailing [melanie.taylor@hazelwoodplantscapes.co.uk](mailto:melanie.taylor@hazelwoodplantscapes.co.uk) or visiting [hazelwoodplantscapes.co.uk](http://hazelwoodplantscapes.co.uk)

## SPELLBINDING SEASONAL PLANTING COMBINATIONS



**Cloaked in silver:** *Panicum virgatum* 'Shenandoah', *Celosia* 'Caracas', *Heuchera* 'Smoke and Mirrors' and *Dichondra argentea* 'Silver Falls'

This Shenandoah switchgrass caught my eye at the nursery, reminding me of my time at university in Virginia. Its fountain-like sprays add delicate movement; here it stands tall like a sentinel against the deep velvety rich hues of the *celosia* and the shimmering *heuchera*. The *dichondra*'s glaucous silvery leaves cascade over the rim. Garden centres are full of what the industry calls 'looking good now' plants, so this display will need some gentle editing as the temperatures fall. The *celosia* won't cope with frost so replace that with some winter heather and whilst you can leave the grass for wildlife during the winter, you will need to cut it back in spring when new shoots appear.



**Flaming firework:** *Phormium cookianum* 'Flamingo', *Heuchera* 'Cherryberry', *Heucherella* 'Buttered Rum' and *Anemanthele lessoniana*

*Phormiums* are a great choice in an architectural evergreen scheme. The Flamingo's striped sword-like leaves shoot up in apricot, green and pink tones. I've paired it with the ever-reliable *heucheras* and the delicate bronze pheasant's tail grass, *Anemanthele lessoniana*. Once established in a border, the *phormium* is a good drought-tolerant choice but those in containers will need regular watering. Good drainage is vital. Borderline hardy, the leaves of this mountain flax are more delicate than the common flax so you might want to position your container along a house wall or under a porch to protect it from winds and frost over the winter.



**Acid chic:** *Cupressus macrocarpa* 'Goldcrest Wilma', *Ophiopogon planiscapus nigrescens*, *Artemisia schmidtiana* 'Nana', *Senecio cineraria* and snowdrop bulbs

This zesty combination of lime green, silver and black really pops. Underplanting the arrangement with snowdrop bulbs gives a monochromatic vibe in spring. The lemon cypress lives up to its name, releasing a citrusy scent when cut or brushed against. It prefers full or partial sun to retain its colouring so place it in a sheltered spot away from drying winds and water regularly but avoid waterlogging. The *artemisia* and cypress both demand good drainage, so mix 30% grit in with your potting mix. *Artemisia* is less hardy in pots so you might need to edit it out in severe frosts but the evergreen *Senecio cineraria* will go on.