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THE FLOWER YARD IN CONTAINERS & POTS

CREATING PARADISE SEASON BY SEASON

RIZZOLI
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The new flower yard

A small garden rarely has the benefit of a surrounding landscape or views, so usually you rely on plants to block out unsightly visions that close suburbia entails. A good plant skeleton is vital, therefore, if you're to have year-round interest and screening – I'm referring to the blight of dustbins and neighbours' cars or the neighbours themselves, plant all of these things out of sight if need be!

This is a more diverse and different take from when I first began gardening, to my first flower yard in fact, where every pot was planted with just tulip bulbs each autumn after taking out the summer annuals in haste, meaning that the garden was a very unstable, flash-in-the-pan creation, as well as being expensive and needy. To treat a garden like this is not only hugely demanding, it's also, arguably, not sustainable. Just one type, one group of plants making up the garden's entirety, is an unnatural monoculture too reminiscent of the often sterile Victorian bedding displays, the opposite of what a healthy, biodiverse garden should be, which occurs by having a large array of curated plants, reminiscent of the traditional mixed cottage garden.

More and more, it's important to me for the garden to have some good bones, provided by woody stems that in turn create canopies that give shelter to garden birds and other wildlife; decay and self-seeding are welcome now. Bees make me smile and feel worthy of being on this planet more than anything else, particularly when I see them being nourished within a welcoming flower that I have grown. Watching bees is an anti-depressant visual, you take in the life of that bee buzzing and think, yes, I'm part of this big wheel of creation now, it's my job to look after the bees by growing flowers for them. This gives us the most honest purpose for being on this planet, which is very nurturing for your soul to feel.

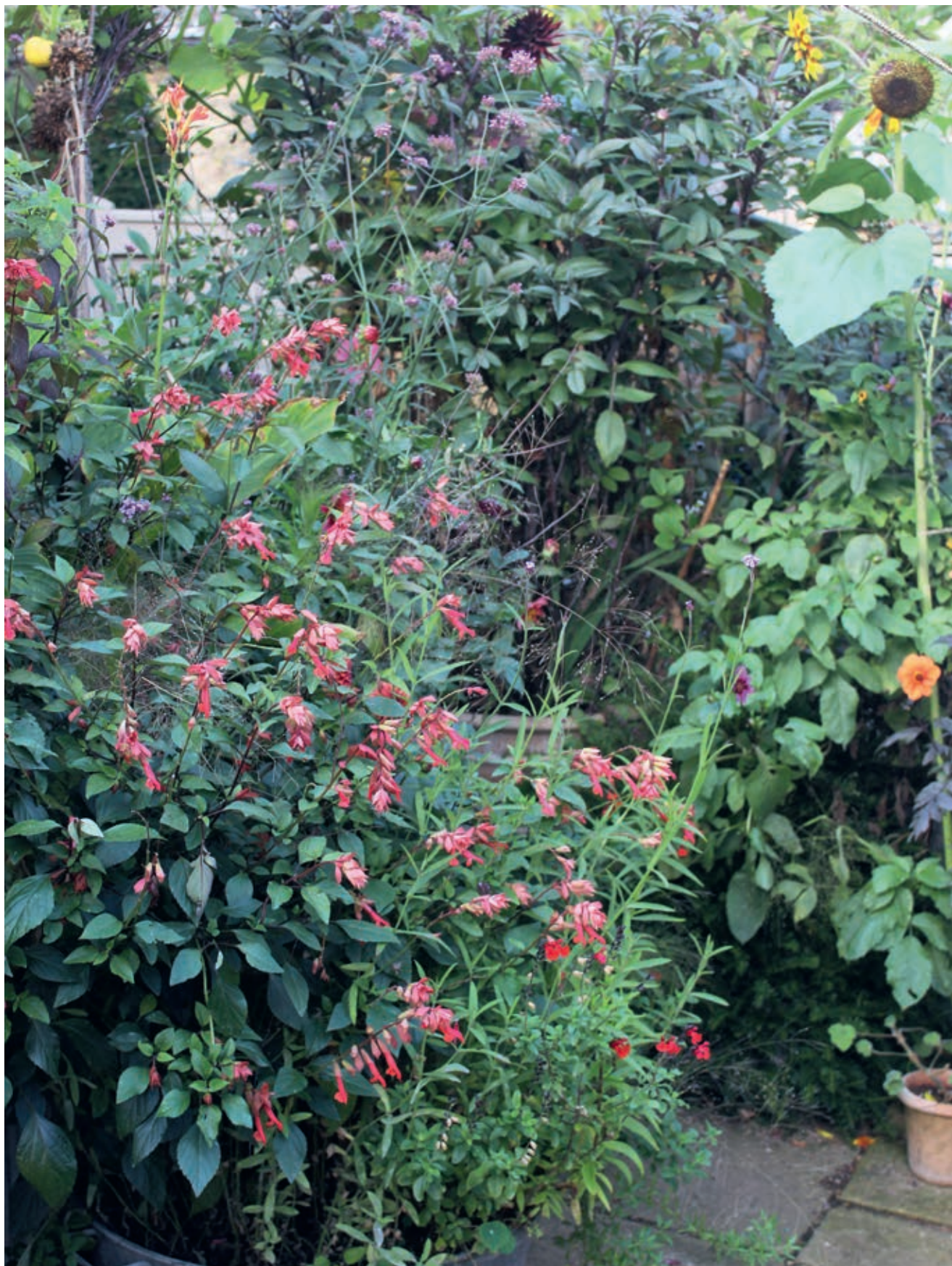
By ensuring plant diversity, a plant tapestry forms and this finds its own magical and invigorating rhythm of growth. Admittedly, most of my largest pots are still designated for annual glamour, which is the spring bulb display replaced with flowering summer and autumn annuals, because the injection of these is exciting and creates drama. But the garden is no longer just an annual display in its entirety. Instead, other pots which swell around these firework-like pots contain more constant, perennial appearances to ensure there is constant form and interest.

PREVIOUS Late summer abundance, the fizz of grasses and saucer faces of flowers.

OPPOSITE An erupting rosette of silver-blue cardoon foliage. Thanks to a 2 litre (3½ pint) cardoon plant being planted on top of tulip bulbs back in the autumn, the cardoon now gives clout and fullness to the spring tulip display of toffee-orange 'Brown Sugar' and Tudor-red 'Palmyra'. The pots standing off the ground on the plant stand contain freshly planted dahlia tubers as it is now mid-spring and the risk of hard frosts is usually behind us.







MY FLOWER YARD CHARACTERS

This is a list of my favourite characters for my pots and why I love them, but please note I can grow these because my garden gets a good amount of sun. If you are in a shady situation, you won't be able to grow everything that's listed here; instead, see page 186 for some suggestions for a more shaded flower yard.

Canopies and climbers

- * Plant for shelter, shade, scale, fruit and blossom, autumn colour, concealment and privacy, and to encourage pollinators and garden birds.
- * Small trees and shrubs include figs, crab apples, eucalyptus, holly, roses, hawthorn tree 'Prunifolia'.
- * Climbers include ivy, *Hydrangea petiolaris*, passionflowers, honeysuckles, climbing roses, star jasmine, pyracantha.
- * Annuals include runner beans and pumpkins.

Structure and form

- * Plant for scale and effect, autumn colour, winter interest, clout, glamour, harvest, privacy and garden birds.
- * To create a rib cage and a backbone of constant form through the year plant cardoons and artichokes, yew and bay, cornus, ferns, rosemary, sage, lavender and hardy herbs, kales and chards.
- * For billowing and moving clumps and seedheads plant *Panicum* 'Frosted Explosion', *Chasmanthium latifolium*, fennel, salvias, agapanthus.

Florals guests

- * Plant for glamour, colour, craziness, harvests and to encourage pollinators.
- * In winter plant violas and spring bulbs such as tulips, narcissi, alliums.
- * In summer plant dahlias, sunflowers, cosmos, tagetes, lilies, gladioli, astroemeria, honesty, amaryllis, viper's-bugloss.

Scents

- * Plant for the senses, herbal teas and for pollinators.
- * Try hyacinths, narcissi, honeysuckles, roses, all herbs, lemon verbena, scented-leaf pelargoniums.

PREVIOUS The shed can be hidden with massed pots from late spring to late summer, most effective in the latter season thanks to salvia 'Ember's Wish' and dahlia 'Black Jack' (right).

OPPOSITE Clockwise from top left Mixing annual plants to ensure an exciting pop and billow is essential if hanging baskets are not to look uptight and dumpy. If space is truly at a premium then hanging baskets will prove to be a major part of the garden's display. The hardy fuchsia 'Dying Embers'. As young plants these are growing in a trio of terracotta pots in dappled shade, lined up along a wall like elegantly draping exclamation marks. I'm increasingly discovering the beauty of flowering shrubs and many are especially suited to being in pots. Hyacinths are much underrated bulbs being very perennial, rich in perfume and fantastic cut flowers. An excellent pairing of flowers in a pot according to their heights: viola 'Tiger Eye Red' provides heart beneath the airy *Narcissus poeticus* (pheasant's eye). They were planted in the same pot in early autumn, the violas flowering before and after the narcissi have finished flowering.





The power of pots

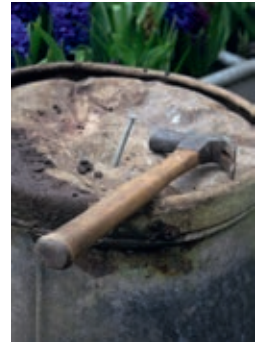
'Pots, that's real mental health,' says my neighbour, Charlotte. She loves her pots despite having a big garden because, as she puts it, the work is instantly done, either by emptying and replanting, or by preening the existing plants and containers; it's instant gratification. I suppose I could portray my pots as being that, as they have certainly witnessed enough of it.

The actual magic of pots is that, regardless of what you might have in them, you can move them, you can even completely rearrange the display as if it's a posh garden centre's entrance foyer, if you want to. You can't do that with an herbaceous border, or if you do start digging it up it's often a year's wait before you can see whether your meddling has paid off. With pots, though, the result and satisfied feeling of having achieved something can be immediate, and that is probably why I like gardening this way the most.

UNDERSTANDING POTS

Every pot needs to have at least one hole at its base to allow for drainage – there are no exceptions to this rule, apart from container ponds, obviously! Drainage holes need to be covered over with one large bit of crock or slate completely to stop them from getting blocked up by compost that will cause a clog. Then scatter over the top of the covered drainage holes more generous pieces of polystyrene or broken terracotta and slate. Then cover these big bits with a layer of at least 2.5cm (1 inch) of grit or small gravel. This ensures good drainage by making sure the drainage holes don't become clogged with soil and by slowing drainage which allows the pot to absorb more water. In the case of galvanised pots, it's a good idea to totally cover the bottom with broken-up polystyrene, because this helps prevent rusting.

Always fill up pots properly, even big ones unless there is a concern over their weight, such as on balconies. There was once a popular habit of filling up pots halfway with the gubbins of old plastic or terracotta pots and polystyrene to scrimp on the amount of compost required to fill them, but this isn't beneficial to the plants. You want the bulk of your pots to be full of compost so that the roots of your plants can grow as deep as they wish. This also helps to prevent your pots being blown over, especially tall ones, which can happen if all the weight of the compost is towards the top.



ABOVE Every single pot must have drainage holes and these must be covered over with drainage materials. Without this, hopes of successful growth and plant health are trashed.

OPPOSITE In small gardens a table will often be the garden's central heart. Use it as a stage, gathering pots around and on it.

Bigger is always better. The deeper and wider a pot is the cooler and deeper the roots can grow, and the larger a pot is, the more soil and moisture it can hold. This will reduce plant stress, too, which can occur quickly in small pots of hungry plants. Larger pots are also more impactful for a small space and are easier to manage, requiring less-frequent watering because they dry out more slowly.

If you inherit pots and don't like them, don't live with them – give them away. You can easily get too potty in a small garden and that can ruin the look, as well as make things stressful, with too many containers full of this and that, all needing attention, getting pot bound and being eaten by various pests. Frequent sorting out and rearranging through the year is very beneficial for a little garden and your mind. A good fettle about is a great tonic.

HOW TO LAY OUT YOUR POTS


Envisage your pots creating flower beds by grouping them. Only the largest or most ornate of pots can hold court as grand single islands in the middle of a garden, on a hard surface or within flower beds. Grouping small pots on garden tables gives a collective splendour, and this position is also useful for growing things from seed and tubers, since getting them off the ground protects the vulnerable massively from slugs.

- * Lining pots down either side of a garden path from a door or to a gate, or either side of steps works well, as you are treating them as if they are making flower beds collectively.
- * For making doorway statements, choose pots as pairs, and go as large as you can afford or have room for. Dinky does not make a doorway look grand. Matching pairs of pots also look great on either side of permanent garden features such as benches.
- * A huge island of pots can often look very lavish and imposing, and can be created by encircling lower pots around an especially large one – imagine the pots are forming tiers as on a wedding cake.
- * Crowd pots into corners for them to radiate outwards, the largest and tallest towards the back and the smaller towards the front, in a triangle shape.

OPPOSITE Especially large and commanding pots such as this old copper one often look their most superb if they aren't crowded out by others.





 **POT SIZES**

The following is a list of the pots I use in my garden. Vintage galvanised metal is usually thicker and more long lasting than newly made, thin sided zinc containers.

OVAL TIN BATH

59cm (23 inches) long, 46cm (18 inches) wide at the centre, 25cm (10 inches) deep

Suitable for bulb lasagnes (see page 90) of two layers, violas, wallflowers and all herbs.

Honesty, cosmos, pelargoniums, salvias, borage, linaria, *Cerinthe major*, geums, *Panicum capillare* 'Sparkling Fountain' and *Chasmanthium latifolium*.

CATTLE TROUGH

127cm (50 inches) long, 46cm (18 inches) wide, 40cm (16 inches) deep

Suitable for salvias and all herbs, lavenders, cardoons and artichokes, cornus, bay, bulb lasagnes of 2–3 layers, lilies, cosmos, hawthorn and bird-attractive hedges, figs, pelargoniums.

OLD DOLLY TUB

48cm (19 inches) deep, 43cm (17 inches) wide

OLD DUSTBIN

61cm (24 inches) deep, 48 cm (19 inches) wide

Both dustbin and dolly tub are suitable for wigwams of sweet peas, pumpkins, runner beans, cosmos, dahlias, figs, roses with accompanying salvias, three-layered bulb lasagnes, sunflowers and lilies.

OLD COAL HOUSE BUCKET

30cm (12 inches) deep, 30cm (12 inches) wide

Suitable for pelargoniums, tagetes, linaria and single layers of bulbs.

SMALL VINTAGE TERRACOTTAS

9cm (3½ inches) deep, 9cm (3½ inches) wide to 13cm (5 inches) deep, 13cm (5 inches) wide

Suitable for cuttings and small spring bulbs.

**VINTAGE VICTORIAN TERRACOTTAS
(KNOWN AS SANKEY POTS)**

A minimum of 20cm (8 inches) deep, 23cm (9 inches) wide

Suitable for statement single pots for plants such as pelargoniums or treating single tulips bulbs as Dutch still-life studies. Also snowdrops, muscari and hyacinths.

REUSABLE PLASTICS

- * Sets of root trainers for sweet peas, 32 cells.
- * 2–3 litre (3½–5 pint) pots suitable for dahlia tubers.
- * Old square and tall rose pots suitable for lily bulbs.
- * 9cm (3½ inch) square pots suitable for potting cosmos seedlings and direct sowing annual seeds into.

LARGE COPPER POT

48cm (19 inches) tall, 71cm (28 inches) wide

Suitable for bulb lasagnes and an array of summer annuals such as cosmos, tagetes and panicum grasses.

OPPOSITE Old galvanised dustbins can still be found fairly cheaply and are on of my list of favourite large pots. Here they are lined up together and have within them one of the best pollinator and pot plants, that flowers for almost the whole year, the perennial wallflower *erysimum* 'Bowles's Mauve'. It is growing with hyacinths 'Woodstock'.



POT MATERIALS AND EXTREME WEATHER

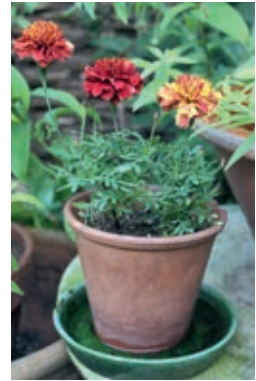
The effects of extreme climate change are swiftly being felt around the world. This impacts plants in pots more so than those in the ground, as hard frosts and heatwaves are felt more by plants in containers.

Terracotta – Terracotta is porous and will absorb moisture readily, so large terracotta pots are best lined around their inner sides with old compost bags before being filled, to help them retain moisture over the summer. I have mixed views about the need to raise large terracotta pots off the ground, as newly bought ones are usually considered to be frostproof and none of mine are raised up on ‘feet’. They are, though, sat on gravelled areas. During the winter, I place small terracotta pots on plant stands and tables rather than on the ground in any case.

Galvanised metal and metal – These absorb heat very quickly during the summer, so it’s best to line the sides of cattle troughs with upright sheets of recycled polystyrene, which will help reflect the absorbing heat away from the soil and protect the plant roots. In the winter such sheets will then insulate from the cold. Round dolly tubs and dustbins can be lined with wool fleecing, the sort often used for packaging frozen food, as it has very good insulation properties.

In the winter, extremely low temperatures are likely to become more and more common. Warmer city microclimates help, but depending on the severity and what you are growing in your pots some can be protected from frost by being wrapped up with horticultural or recycled wool fleece or bubble wrap around their outsides. Mulching, which is heaping an extra layer of compost on top of the pot during the winter months, will help any plants that are considered to be tender, such as salvias, penstemons and dahlias, if they are going to be left in their pots.

For a mulch to be successful it needs to be heaped on like a molehill or miniature flamingo mud pie nest so that its depth is a good 10cm (4 inches) at least. It can then be brushed off in late spring. You can shove pieces of broken roof slate around the rim on the inside to help mound up the mulch successfully.



ABOVE Small terracotta pots will dry out swiftly in the summer heat, so water saucers under them will assist in them surviving, especially if you are partial to having weekends away. This one contains *tagetes* ‘Strawberry Blonde’.

OPPOSITE *Tagetes patula* ‘Konstance’. Sometimes reaching 45cm (18 inches), such varieties are compact enough to not require staking but are also not dinky. These are growing in a galvanised coal bucket, having been sown back in late spring, and just one seedling quickly bushes up and fills out.