

Cover Story

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Punching Up Patios & Porches

Katie Elzer-Peters

As an industry, we (typically) service indoor spaces and outdoor spaces separately, from furnishings to plants to decor. Part of the reason for this is practicality of inventory management in limited space. Out in the design and decorating world, though, there's much more cross-pollination happening. Furniture doesn't have to be weatherproof to go outdoors—if it came from the salvage shop, it can be replaced after a few seasons. Lots of people buy plants for one reason: they're pretty. Let's use that! When it comes to outdoor rooms, market plants as part of the temporary décor.

Star Roses and Plants has used “plants as pretty” as the defining intent behind the entire consumer-facing marketing campaign for their L.A. Dreamin' Hydrangea. (Which is, by the way, a great plant for partial shade outdoor rooms. They'll match all of the throw pillows.) These plants offer something different that a hard-core gardener will pick up on (pink and blue blooms on the same plant), but the plants are directly marketed as elements of décor to be enjoyed and then, possibly, tossed. The inspiration page of the microsite ladreaminhydrangea.com looks like a Coachella influencer's Instagram page—on purpose. Head over to the site for Bushel and Berry (a sister line) and you'll get the same feeling—“I NEED this patio raspberry plant (Raspberry shortcake) to complete my al fresco dining room.”



Pictured: Costa Farms with an example of creating an indoor-inspired room outside. Their French country style porch starts with a braided throw rug, distressed painted furniture, ruffled calico cushions, and rustic metal accents. The “room” is finished with double impatiens, Boston fern, Sensation Spathiphyllum and lady palm (Rhapsis). All of these are really best in full shade, or with just a tiny bit of morning sun.

Photo Credit: Costa Farms

Setting the Stage

First things first. If you want people to think about plants as décor, you need to show them plants being used as décor. Make your own little Ikea-inspired sample rooms with all of the elements available for purchase. You don't have to build an entire patio, but making a set will allow customers to envision the plants in situ. Depending on what you sell and where you're located, here's what to mock up:

- Outdoor kitchen
- Fire pit with seating
- Screened-in porch or covered porch
- Courtyard garden (to mimic green spaces attached to patio homes)
- Sun deck (add some patio umbrellas and pool floats to make the connection to the poolscape)

Set Decoration

Furniture might define a room, but accessories are what finish it. Here's how to accessorize your vignettes with new, interesting and time-tested plant picks.

Foodie Fest: For the outdoor kitchen, grilling patio and firepit, start with edibles. Bushel and Berry offers five patio blueberries, as well as Baby Cakes Blackberry and Raspberry Shortcake Raspberry. The plants aren't just productive, they're attractive, and the "Ohmigosh you can eat that!" wow factor is a conversation starter for areas meant for meeting and mingling.

This area is a perfect place to pitch your self-watering container selection and highlight patio vegetables. Burpee's Meatball Eggplant, Baby Boomer Tomato (a compact cherry) and Tangerine Dream Pepper are all pint-sized edibles. Rosemary, lavender and culinary sage are also good picks for "edible arrangements."

Made for the Shade: Christina Salwitz, designer, author, and Visual Merchandising Coach with The Garden Center Group is a plant combination wizard with great tips for sprucing up shady corners of patios and porches with dynamic container gardens.

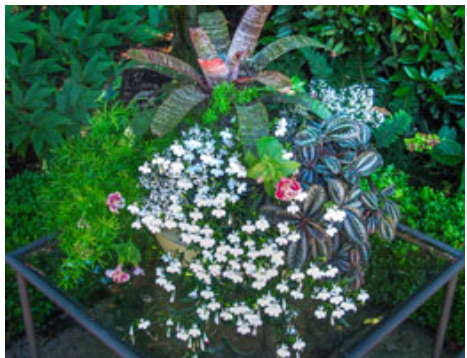


"I spend a lot of time trying to help people start thinking outside the box. It seems to rock their world when I tell them not to stick to the annuals section, but to visit every department," Christina says. "You could find a really cool groundcover to use as a trailing plant or a hardy fuchsia that can be moved into the landscape."

Pictured: Designer Christina Salwitz recommends visiting every department for mixed combos, like this one with fuchsia and a dracaena in it.

Photo Credit: Christina Salwitz

She's finding more inspiration in the houseplant section these days. "These plants don't know where they're at," she notes. "If you find a houseplant with a unique leaf pattern that you can mix with caladiums and other plants, it really changes and enhances your options." She says she buys 3-in. polka dot plants by the flat. "I have one client who wants pink everything, but I can only cram so many pink impatiens and geraniums into a display." Bromeliads and pilea (aluminum plant) are two additional houseplants she recommends. Incorporating them into your seasonal containers will get you more mileage from that category.



Pictured: Christina Salwitz recommends houseplants like bromeliads and pilea (aluminum plant) for containers.

Photo Credit: Christina Salwitz

She articulates what I think we, as an industry, can do a better job of with customers: "I think of containers as just big flower arrangements that you enjoy for the season." As long as the plants share similar water and light requirements, you can combine anything with anything else—perennials, woody plants, annuals, groundcovers and houseplants.

Courtyard & Patio Home Gardens: Patio homes are huge right now, but they come with small outdoor spaces, often fenced, sometimes in full sun (especially in new construction), but often with shady corners. These spaces require tall, skinny plants that tolerate hedging and pruning. Monrovia's Tiny Tower Italian Cypress is a striking plant for smaller full-sun gardens. But without proper merchandising, it can be difficult for customers to picture growing it at home.

For full-sun spaces, this year's standouts are plants in the Hollywood Hibiscus series from J.Berry Nursery in Texas. Almost every flower color is represented. Leading Lady is a bright lemon yellow with a white center. Playboy is fire-engine red. Disco Diva is a brand new orange flowered variety with a delicate pink throat. Plants bloom continuously all summer.

On the opposite spectrum in terms of light, height and habit are The Southern Living (and Sunset Western Garden) Plant Collections' Soft Caress Mahonia. This is my new favorite plant for its compact habit and feathery evergreen texture. Hardy in Zones 7 to 9, it can be used as an annual accent or specimen plant in containers. Caladiums are classic shade plants and Abbott-Lpco has a stunning new introduction, Lemon Blush, a red fancy-leaved variety with a rose red center and wide chartreuse margin.

Stop letting customers leave with a couple of Boston ferns and a 6-pack of marigolds—help them see that there's more to container gardening than spikes. **GP**

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