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## Taking It Tropical

*Ellen C. Wells*

Your combination planters fly off the benches—if they even make it off the racks from the grower or out of your hard-at-work custom container department. You may have noticed in recent years that adding a tropical plant or two (or three!) to the mix creates even more of a hot commodity. What's making tropical-flavored container mixes so popular? And what tropical plants can you incorporate into your container rotation for maximum consumer satisfaction?

### **First, Why Combos?**

Nature's Way Farms in Miami, Florida, has been growing tropical combos for a decade. They've always seen interest in combination containers but have seen demand increase in just the last three or more years. "Combinations have always had a place in the product life cycle of the consumer experiencing our category," says Marta Maria Garcia, Nature's Way Marketing Director. "In many cases it's training wheels into gardening ... because they hit on a lot of needs—they don't require a lot of space, they are ready-made and take out the guess work, they provide you with an instant garden." Marta Maria says a new factor is the aging Baby Boomer who despite having increasing limitations still wants to participate in gardening. "They see combos as a benefit. They don't have to invest a lot, it's beautiful and it's a good value."

### **Second, Why Tropicals?**

"Tropicals are easy," said Beatriz Garces, VP of Sales and Marketing for Nature's Way. "We have the tagline, 'Spring to First Frost,' and you can buy a combo with these tropical plants and have them from spring to first frost, whatever that is for your area. That's value. It's exciting. If they were annuals, you'd have to replace it or work a little harder to maintain it."

Beatriz says tropical combos are gaining in popularity throughout the country because they contain tough and resilient plants. "Humidity, rain, heat, shade, part sun—they are grown in an environment [South Florida] that makes them suitable for multiple areas of the country. They're not so sensitive to needing a specific environment. That helps them be adaptable to anywhere in the country," she explains.

### **What Are the Hot Tropicals?**

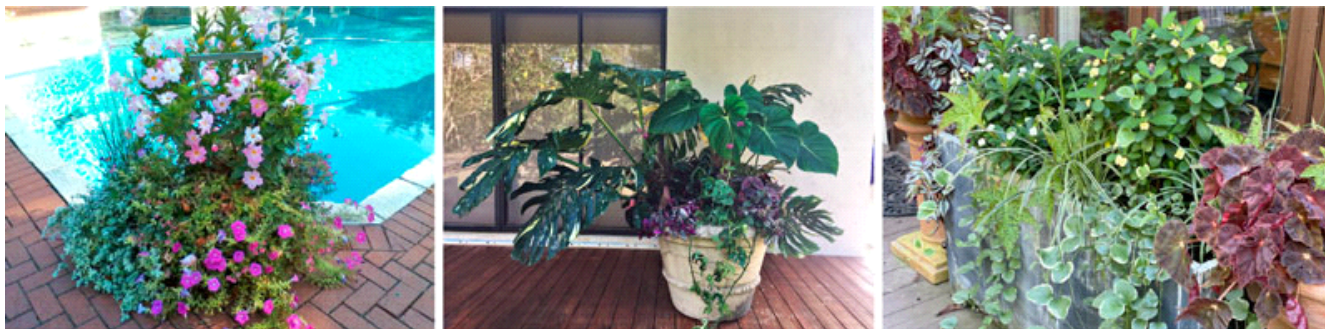
When asked, both Beatriz and Marta Maria mention plant attributes rather than specific plants themselves. Think anything with a bold color, textures, lines and variegation. Ferns have texture. Heliconia have bold colors and shapes. Palms, alocasias and birds of paradise have height and structure. And crotons may just have all of those factors all in one package.

Marta Maria points out that mandevillas and hibiscus have acted as "gateway tropicals" for many people, exposing

them to wonders and ease of that plant group. “Seeing how hardy they are, that they really fill a need for ease, have value, bloom power and all the different foliage and colors that tropicals provide—that shows people you really don’t need [annuals alone] for that pop of color with annuals when you have that pop of color with plants you don’t need to deadhead.”

### Some Tropical Inspiration

Now that you’re convinced both blooming and foliage-only tropicals can make your container sales soar even higher, we have gathered a few sample combos to help get your creative juices flowing.



*Kathy Roberts of Potted Petals in Lombard, Illinois, combined a Mandevilla Alice DuPont with a similarly hued petunia and helichrysum. “I go with the flow of which plants speak to me and their color combinations when I am choosing plants,” Kathy says. “I also follow the old recipe of planting a thriller, filler and spiller in each pot.”*

*Garden Industries’ David Bache created this over-the-top South Florida-appropriate container he called “Foliage Fantasy.” The centerpiece is a 25-gal. Monstera Thai Constellation which is surrounded by Philodendron McDowell, Pink Princess, Begonia Benigo, Tradescantia Nanouk, Epidendrum Purple Reign, Rhapsidophora tetrasperma, Calathea roseopicta Illustris and Cyanotis obtusa. “This is a collector’s dream pot,” David says.*

*Garden author Marianne Willburn’s tropical combo is one she loves because “it shows how well sub-tropicals respond to hot summers. This photo was taken in early October after I’d been gone all of September—my daughter simply watered it. The combo contains Crown Jewels begonias, Euphorbia milli, tradescantia, vinca and some carex ‘for a bit of temperate,’” Marianne says.*



*Julie Hoffmann of East River Nursery in Huron, South Dakota, created this planter for deep shade spots in her own yard. The Cordyline Maria is paired with Petunia Night Sky and Geranium Calliope Crimson Flame and a variegated plectranthus “for a pot that glows” in a dark area, Julie says. “We sell a boatload of cordylines for shady areas.”*

*Julie also created these planters for an outdoor seating area for a local restaurant located along a hot south-facing brick/glass building. The crotons “love the heat!” Julie says. They are paired with petunia Supertunias and Sweet*

*Potato Marguerite. "Very simple but very effective."*

*Author and houseplant guru Lisa Steinkopf spotted this tropically planted urn on a garden walk in Fenton, Michigan. Lisa was "tuned into the fact she used a dracaena," she said, along with sweet potato vine and tuberous begonia. The color coordination between the dracaena and ipomoea makes the combo pop.*

*Bold colors (pots included!), textures and the drama and perceived value of a "thriller" statement plant are the "secret sauce" for the tropical combo containers from Nature's Way.*