



POT POWER

What is a pot plant? For that matter, what is not a pot plant?

Nearly every plant sold at retail, aside from bulbs and b&b trees, leaves the store in some form of container, usually a plastic pot. Most will come out of those pots and go into the ground. Others are destined to live their whole lives in a container, whether they stay in the original pot from the garden center or get shifted into something larger and/or more decorative.

And an unlucky few will go home with truly clueless new gardeners who will plop them into the ground with the pots still on and then wonder why they fail to thrive. May they rest in peace.

But that's beside the point. The point is, even wholesalers who grow for the landscape are in the potted plant business. If it doesn't look good in a pot on the retail shelf, it's apt to languish there while prettier stuff disappears all around it.

Cheri Markowitz of Emerald Coast Growers has studied that phenomenon. "There's tremendous demand for plants that look great in a pot, from about the end of May on," Markowitz said. "Retailers and retail customers want stuff that really stands out."

Markowitz coined the term "Pot Power" to sum up what makes a plant call attention to itself. "It's not limited to any one category," she said. "Plants with 'pot power' can be perennials, annuals, grasses – the only thing they have in common is that they can be finished to look spectacular at the right time."

So let's look at plants that have true Pot Power – the ability to look irresistible in a container in late May/early June.

PERENNIALS and TENDER PERENNIALS

Winter hardiness has tremendous value in the garden, but it's often moot in a container. Those who grow and love hardy plants constantly encourage consumers to enjoy them in as many ways as possible, not just in the border. Lots of great garden-worthy perennials also make wonderful potted ornaments, with a bonus: When the flowering stops or cold weather threatens, homeowners can find appropriate spots in the garden for these versatile plants, and be thrilled all over again next year when they return like old friends.

Many gardeners really do exactly that, but more often, those pretty perennials "might as well have been annuals," Markowitz laments. They're bound for the compost heap as surely as if they were potted geraniums or hanging baskets of Impatiens or Callibrachoa. That's a pity if you look at it as a wasted gardening opportunity, an asset if you embrace it as a second sales opportunity – just like those plants that got planted with their pots still on.

TRUE PERENNIALS (Hardy in Zone 6 or colder)

Dianthus Scent First Pot series: Coconut Surprise, Raspberry Surprise, Tickled Pink

Gaillardia Arizona series: 'Arizona Apricot', 'Arizona Red Shades', 'Arizona Sun'

Gaillardia Gallo® series: Gallo® Dark Bicolour, Gallo® Orange, Gallo® Peach, Gallo® Red, Gallo® Yellow

TENDER PERENNIALS (Need Zone 7-8 or warmer)

Some of the most Pot Powerful plants you can grow are those that tiptoe along the fine line between hardy and non-hardy. Are they tender perennials, or pretty-tough annuals? By the scientific definition, their life cycle makes most of them true perennials that just don't happen to be hardy in most of the US. But that's another moot, and confusing, point: The gardener's non-scientific definition says, if I have to replant it every year, it's an annual.

Plants that fall into this category are not a lasting investment that you can put in the bank for long-term interest, like truly hardy perennials. But they're tougher than traditional annual bedding flat fillers; they can tolerate a little benign neglect, and many will remain decorative deeper into the frosty fall than less-forgiving species. They also tend to be distinctive in appearance, for a different look than you can get with traditional annual options.

Here are some of Emerald Coast Growers' tender perennial candidates for Pot Power status:

Alcea rosea Spring Celebrities series: 'Spring Celebrities Crimson', 'Spring Celebrities Lemon',

'Spring Celebrities Lilac', 'Spring Celebrities Purple', 'Spring Celebrities White'

Coreopsis Coloropsis™: 'Cha Cha Cha', 'Jive', 'Limbo', 'Mamba', 'Salsa'

Lavandula stoechas Little Bee™ series: Hardy to Zone 8(7) Little Bee™ Cream, Little Bee™ Deep Purple, Little Bee™ Deep Rose

Mandevilla Vogue® series: 'Audrey', 'Brigitte', 'Gina', 'Ginger', 'Grace', 'Marilyn', 'Rita', 'Ruby', 'Sophia', 'Vivian'

Rudbeckia hirta: 'Cherry Brandy', Denver Daisy®, 'Indian Summer' and Tiger Eye Gold

Ruellia elegans 'Ragin' Cajun'

Salvia farinacea: 'Evolution'® and 'Evolution'® White'





Of all these lovelies, the Vogue® Mandevilla have to be counted among the loveliest. Hardy only to Zone 9, the series has expanded to embrace 10 varieties in a range of pinks and reds. The foliage is clean, deep glossy green. Flower forms vary a bit – some have extra-wide petals; some take on an appealing pinwheel twist -- but all are deep-centered trumpets, a flaring five-petaled star around a golden throat.

"These are great plants for hot summers," Markowitz said. "They can really take the heat, even in the South."

The nomenclature is confusing. Taxonomists and the trade have conspired to blur the line between Mandevilla and Dipladenia. The Vogues look more like the latter except for their habit, which is more bushy, less vining than earlier forms. And perhaps a little ambiguity is appropriate for a plant that dwells on the hardy/tender cusp.



ORNAMENTAL GRASSES

Over the years our industry has come to define "color" to mean flowers, lots of flowers, usually on annuals in pots, packs or hanging baskets. So a decade or more ago when pioneer grass grower Kurt Bluemel grumbled, "Brown is a color!" his protestation fell on mostly deaf ears. In the years since, growers, landscapers and gardeners have started listening. By any name – bronze, tan, copper – brown is definitely a color and a market presence.

Ornamental grasses, hardy and tender types alike, nestle nicely into the Pot Power niche. The ColorGrass® series did a great job of raising the profile of some great species grasses by giving them evocative names that gardeners can remember, and by proposing the quixotic notion that little brushy things with negligible flowers – yes, even *brown* brushy things -- make great pot crops.

Carex is the go-to genus in this category, with multiple varieties in colors from glaucous blue/green to rich foxy bronze. Most are only a foot or so tall, with some reaching two feet when in flower.

At the other end of the size & form spectrum is the all-green, all-the-time Cyperus papyrus, hardy in Zones 9-11. Standing three feet tall, "dwarf papyrus" makes a spectacular potted specimen for bright shade or full sun.



HARDY GRASSES

ColorGrass® collection:

Carex buchananii (a.k.a. Red Rooster™)

Carex comans (a.k.a. Amazon Mist™)

Nassella tenuissima

TENDER PERENNIAL & ANNUAL GRASSES

Briza maxima

Carex

Cyperus papyrus

Eragrostis tef 'Ruby Silk'

Panicum elegans 'Frosted Explosion'

Lagurus ovatus

Isolepis cernua

Melinis nerviglumis 'Savannah'

Pennisetum villosum "Feathertop grass"



To borrow a phrase from the computer world, there's always room for "plug & play" pots from late May/ early June on. Just as with hardware or software, "plug & play" means ready to go immediately – right into the shopping cart and home to the patio, deck or garden. *That's Pot Power.*



For more information:

Emerald Coast Growers, PO Box 10886, Pensacola, FL 32524

Ornamental grass and perennial liners *Wholesale only* 877-804-7277

