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Secrets at DeWald Gardens

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It's no longer headline news that showy combination containers are hot on the market. The secret is out and so are the recipes for eye-pleasing designs. Growers, designers and consumers alike understand the importance of color, texture, contrast, and depth. We've learned that by sticking to these principles, even the most unusual combinations of annuals, tropicals, and perennials can produce great results.

With the trend seemingly here to stay and many of the best plant species divulged, what's left to distinguish the greatest combination containers from the great? We visited DeWald Gardens in Fort Wayne, Indiana, for some answers. A small and independent operation, DeWald Gardens has used their excellence in container gardening not just to survive but to thrive amid a sea of big box competitors and a decline in the number of consumers.

Maria and Stephen DeWald credit the observant and detail-oriented scientists in them for much of their success owning and operating a seasonal retail business. The couple built their business 10 years ago with a dream and a passion for gardening and horticulture. Complemented with dual PhDs in horticulture and impressive resumes as lab scientists, they've taken their passion for plant production and container gardening down to a science and it's paying off.

Maria has earned herself a reputation for exceptional mixed container designs and also for inspiring others with her engaging presentations. Invited back by popular demand, Maria will speak for us again at *GrowerTalks'* Greenhouse Experience 2007, September 9-12 in Cleveland, Ohio. With her audience coming from a wide variety of climates, her strategy isn't to provide detailed recipes, but rather to inspire other growers with her own story: the inspirations and discoveries of a scientist designing, producing, and selling mixed container gardens. Here's a sneak peak into the DeWald's story and their tips for success.

1. Find and perfect your niche

DeWald Gardens has established itself as a successful retailer by identifying and perfecting its own niche within the bigger market. With all the major chain giants just down the street, Maria and Steve focus on the products that the big stores can't do well and back away from those they do.

"We consciously decide what we sell and what we don't. We're not trying to sell the most flats," explains Maria.

"We use combination containers and quality customer service to differentiate ourselves from our big competitors," adds Steve.

2. Know your customers

DeWald Gardens has capitalized on the demand for mixed combos in part by understanding the social influences behind it. While the debate continues over the decline of gardening, the DeWald's have adapted their business to serve a new generation of plant consumers that has the desire and the money to garden but lacks the time. Maria describes this generation as information driven, with an orderly sense of style, and willing to pay more for a quality product they want. DeWald Gardens meets the demand with top-quality plants and mixed combos, priced

accordingly, and accompanied with informative customer service. “Over the past several seasons we have managed to maintain strong profits in the face of a shrinking customer base by increasing the average transaction,” explains Steve.

The challenge then becomes matching the right mixed containers to the right customer. The DeWald’s praise their seasonal crew, who learn the plants and their characteristics early in the spring while making the combos under Maria’s direction. Knowledgeable staff can provide a level of customer service that isn’t available to shoppers at the big stores. Providing customers with the guidance and information they need to succeed with their plant purchases is a profitable cycle, inspiring customers to expand their gardening endeavors and buy more plants in the future. With my own empty containers in tow, Maria helped me choose an assortment of plants to adorn my hot, south-facing deck.

“What is your lifestyle like?” was the first question Maria asked of me. A seemingly personal inquisition, but intended only to determine whether I have time to regularly dead-head my daisy, enabling it to bloom all summer. This in-depth understanding of the customer’s lifestyle (combined with the typical sun/shade/color/style questions) ensures that the customer leaves with a selection of plants that will succeed in their new home.

3. Know the trends

Maria argues that she’s a scientist and not a designer, but there’s no denying that she creates beautiful, innovative, and trendy mixed combos. Her secret is to study design like a true scientist. The floral industry has proven to be her best subject. “Floral designers know more about the trends in design than anyone else because they work directly with their customers and know what they like,” Maria explains. Maria studies floral design by attending both local and national events during the off-season. “Right now people like very neat, clean, and symmetrical flower arrangements.” She has incorporated that trend into some of her designs, using things such as spiral evergreens for structure. Mixed succulent combos are another stylish trend with the added bonus of being low-maintenance.

4. Research your material

As most growers can attest, the “off-season” is really a misnomer. The DeWald’s spend much of their off-season working normal hours. They travel the country, attending conferences, seminars, visiting other growers, and combing pack trials for new ideas and plant varieties to implement during the next season.

5. Test your material

Research alone is never enough. Testing material in their own greenhouse and in container combinations has proven essential in the DeWald’s business, as not everything performs predictably. A petunia that showed spectacular promise at Pack Trials was so aggressive in Maria’s containers that it out-competed everything else, earning the nickname “pink beast” and teaching her a lesson the hard way. The DeWalds make an effort to try new plants and ideas in moderation for one season before increasing production.

6. Coordinate your plant production

Coordinating plant production specifically for mixed containers is a key DeWald strategy that they continue to perfect. With Mother’s Day being the peak for their mixed containers, plants destined for combos are typically started earlier than the same plant varieties destined for the tabletop. Some of their tropicals are started a full season in advance to achieve the desired size for a combo. Coordinating plant sizes and blooming times is also key for ensuring a long-lasting design that will flourish from early spring all the way into fall. A plant such as a vinca or lantana may be barely noticeable in the container in the spring, but will steal the show in the heat of the summer when other plants start to fade.

7. Use combos as your showcase

DeWald Gardens sells much more than mixed containers, but it’s the combos and combo displays that inspire customers. Mixed containers serve as a showcase for the tabletop, showing customers what plant species group well together, and giving individual plants on the bench a context. A purple sweet potato vine in a single 4.5-in. pot may say little to a customer, but seeing it trailing over the edge of a big container, adding depth to the combo, provides a contextual example that may inspire a purchase. Maria also adopts many of the design principles she

uses in her mixed containers for displaying plants on the benches.

For more tips and tricks for successful mixed container design and production, come hear Maria DeWald at *GrowerTalks'* [Greenhouse Experience](#) this September.

Annie White is an environmental designer & landscape architect in Fort Wayne, Indiana. The sibling of GrowerTalks' editor-at-large, she has not strayed far from the genetic green thumb of the White family.