



ANNUAL
GERANIUM
Pelargonium hybrids

Tender perennial
Flowers in shades of pink,
red, orange or white
Full sun
Well-drained soil
No serious pests
5 to 24 in. tall,
9 to 18 in. wide
Cold-hardy in
USDA zones 9 to 11
Heat-tolerant in
AHS zones 12 to 1

10 tips that'll work this year!

Grow Gorgeous Geraniums

One of my favorite garden centers has table after table of perfect annual geraniums every spring. And as I'm filling flats, I have a hard time narrowing down my choices. There are just too many of those huge flowers in cheerful colors. The problem I always come up against — and maybe you do, too — is how to keep those geraniums looking as nice as this vibrant group in photo 1. To find the recipe for success, I talked with gardeners whose geraniums always look fabulous, as well as some people in the geranium business. They started by explaining the difference between cutting- and seed-grown types (find out more below), then shared some great tips for success when growing geraniums at home. Let me show you what I learned.

1 LIGHT 'EM UP Geraniums like the sun. They will flower in as little as four hours a day but not nearly as well as they do with six or more. That said, a little afternoon shade doesn't hurt where summers get extra hot.

I like buying my geraniums early to get just the right colors. The problem is I can't always put them outside right away — nights

are too cold. Even a few days in a dark garage can set back flower formation up to three weeks. In fact, a cloudy spell can do this, too. So if you're determined to have geraniums early, make sure to keep them in the sun when possible and even use a grow light if you can.

2 SAY "NO" TO YELLOW LEAVES You may have noticed that sometimes geranium leaves turn yellow in summer. They eventually drop off, leaving a bare, leggy base. There are several possible causes: too much water, too little water or not enough fertilizer.

To avoid too much water when you're growing geraniums in containers, skip the saucer, which might hold too much water. Go with pot feet to protect your deck or patio from any moisture that might run through the drainage hole.

On the other hand, geraniums don't wilt as quickly or dramatically as other annuals do when they're drought-stressed. When they do wilt, they're *really* dry. To prevent this, check the soil every week during summer or daily with containers. If the soil is dry when you push your finger in about an inch, then it's time to water. And when you do water, thoroughly soak the soil — don't just wet the top few inches.

Regular feedings keep geranium foliage fresh. I'll tell you more about that next.

3 FEED THEM! Geraniums just from the garden center are usually blooming and may even have a few more buds hiding among the leaves. To keep your plants producing, fertilize, fertilize, fertilize.

Mixing a dose of slow-release fertilizer into the soil or potting mix is a good start. But flowers will bloom larger and longer if you

* **choices, choices...** You might notice a big difference in price between these two types. Although breeders are improving seed-grown varieties, in general, here's what you'll find:

Cutting-grown

- Larger flowers
- Wider range of colors
- More expensive



Seed-grown

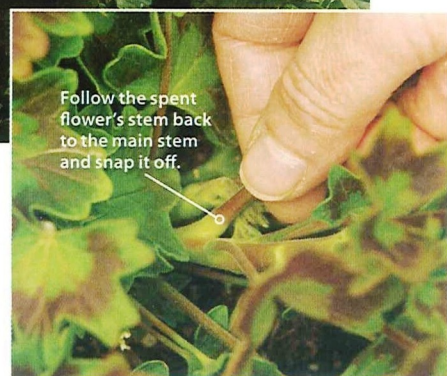
- Smaller single flowers
- Petals fall off easily
- Less expensive so economical choice for mass plantings



Americana® Pink

Americana® Light Pink Splash

Tango™ Rose Splash



Follow the spent flower's stem back to the main stem and snap it off.

PHOTO: Doug Appleby

also feed them every week with a balanced liquid all-purpose formula, such as 10-10-10 at full strength.

When temperatures reach 90 degrees, geraniums slow their flower production. To keep plants on track, switch to a “bloom buster” product. That’s a formula with more phosphorus (the middle number), which encourages root and flower growth. I like to use Fertilome® Blooming and Rooting liquid plant food (9-59-8) from my local garden center.

4 DEADHEAD FOR COLOR There’s one last thing that keeps geraniums looking their best — deadheading. As individual flowers fade, pull the brown petals out to keep the flower head looking good longer. Then, when

all the flowers on a stem are dead, take it off so the new blooms come along more quickly. In the photo at right, see how I’m following the stem down to the bulge? You snap it off at the joint that connects the two. Trying to pull from a higher point can damage the brittle main stem. You can also snip the stems back below the foliage and they’ll eventually dry up and fall off on their own.

In addition to these tips, find out how to save your geranium plants from year to year in our Web extra. And turn the page for great design ideas using these plants.



Video: Save money with our simple overwintering technique.

DESIGN TIPS FOR GERANIUMS

Now that you have gorgeous geraniums, let's take a look at how to show them off. In the past, most geranium flowers were red, and mostly orange-red at that. But these days there's a dizzying array of colors and shades and everything from trailing to upright habits. Let's walk through some tips on how to use these great flowers in your garden.

5 SHOUT "HEY!" WITH HOT COLORS Do you have trouble working red-orange flowers into a planting? You're not the only one. Take Americana® Red and Tango™ Deep Red in the photo below, for example. In a mixed planting this color can either grab all the attention or make other colors look sickly. But in this planting the bright, in-your-face red-orange is a great way to say, "Here's my front door!" With about 30 cutting-grown plants growing here it makes a bold statement. But when you're bedding out a lot of geraniums, the less-expensive seed-grown varieties are also good candidates. For

containers, I like to use cutting-grown varieties. They're more expensive, but they tend to have bigger blooms and leaves.

Having the same red at different levels directs visitors' attention to the front door and at the same time unifies the foundation planting. For the biggest impact in a bedding scheme, plant your geraniums right next to each other so the flowers weave together quickly. Some folks don't recommend close planting because it helps create the perfect conditions for fungal disease to take hold. I prevent this from happening by using a soaker hose rather than watering from above with a sprinkler.

Blue-red is a popular color for geranium flowers. It wouldn't work as well here because cooler reds don't stand out from a distance the way that hotter red-orange flowers do. However, blue-red geraniums do tend to mix more easily with other flower colors. Try them with shades of pink, white or lavender.





HANGING BASKET

- A** **Calibrachoa**
Calibrachoa Callie™
White With Rose Vein
- B** **Ornamental pepper**
Capsicum annuum
'Purple Flash'
- C** **Geranium** *Pelargonium*
Caliente® Coral
- D** **Fanflower** *Scaevola*
Whirlwind® Blue



CLASSIC URN

- A** **Licorice vine** *Helichrysum*
petiolare 'Limelight'
- B** **Cuphea** *Cuphaea*
Flamenco Samba
- C** **Ponytail grass**
Stipa tenuissima
- D** **Geranium** *Pelargonium*
Americana® Salmon
- E** **Petunia** *Petunia* Supertunia™
Vista Fuchsia

6 GROW A BETTER BASKET If you see a geranium spilling over the edge of a container, especially a hanging basket, chances are it's an ivy geranium. Flowers are single and just as colorful as the uprights. The trouble is, some plants can be leggy and awkward to work into a container gracefully. But I have some good news for you: Colorcade™, Blizzard® and Caliente® are just a few of the newer series that branch more so they're less gawky looking. I've used Caliente Coral in the basket above. This series is a cross between uprights and ivies. It doesn't trail quite as much as the others but you can see it has a full, well-branched habit that dips over the edge of this basket. And all those flowers are nice, too.

If you can't find these better branching cultivars and want to encourage more bushy growth on an ivy geranium you've already purchased at the garden center, there are a couple of things you can do: First, pinch the plants back once when you get them home. To do this, follow the tip of each stem back to a junction where a leaf or flower joins the main stem, then snap it off. The plant will branch from there to form a bushier habit. Second, grow your basket in plenty of sun (6 hours or more) to make sure plants are producing lots of stems.

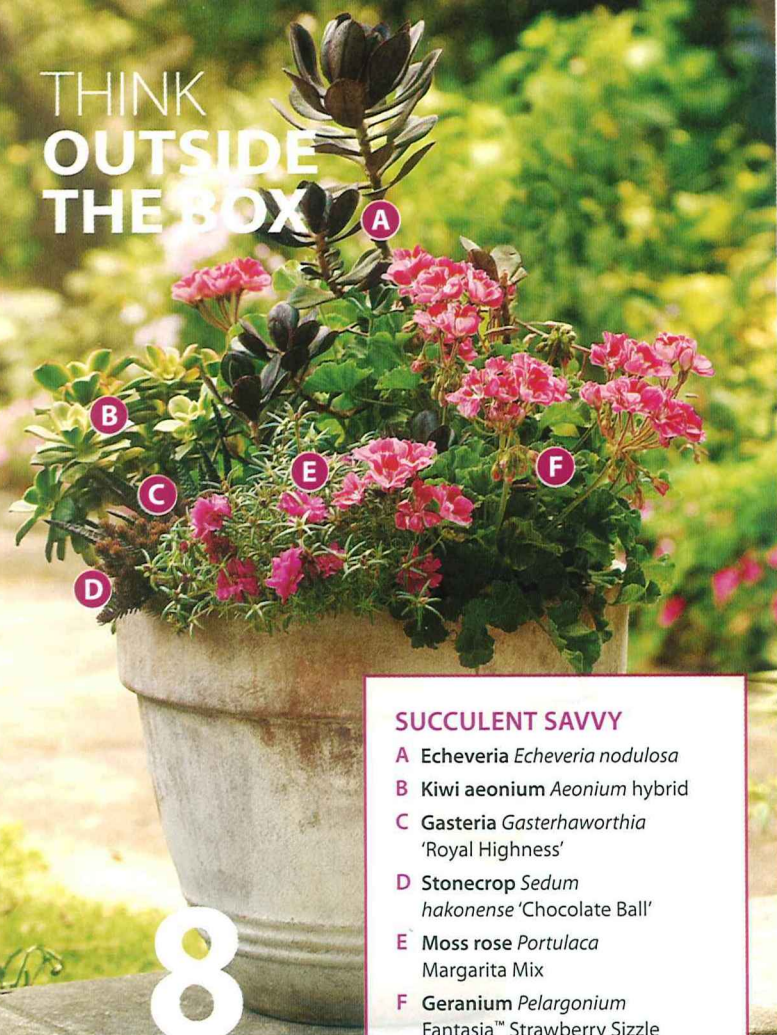
7 TRY A NEW TWIST I bet a quick survey of your neighborhood will turn up at least one terracotta pot or urn with a red geranium, spike and vinca. You can even find this common combo already put together in some stores. And there's nothing wrong with that, but why not give this classic look a new twist?

Let's start with the pot itself. The urn above may look like it weighs a ton, but it's actually made of a composite material that is lightweight and easy to move. This just makes life easier (and is less expensive than an iron one). Then, replace the old spike with a softer, fuller ponytail grass. And instead of vinca, look for a trailing flower. Here I went for cuphea and petunia. Finally, try a new color combo. This salmon geranium is just one option in an entire series of flower colors.

What I like best about this combo is that all these plants will bloom from spring to frost. But even if one hits a lull, there will be other flowers to fill in. With the old formula, if the geranium isn't blooming, the look gets pretty bland.

All these combinations have been more on the traditional side. Check out the next page for some out-of-the-ordinary ideas for growing geraniums.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX



SUCCULENT SAVVY

- A** Echeveria *Echeveria nodulosa*
- B** Kiwi aeonium *Aeonium* hybrid
- C** Gasteria *Gasterhaworthia* 'Royal Highness'
- D** Stonecrop *Sedum hakonense* 'Chocolate Ball'
- E** Moss rose *Portulaca Margarita* Mix
- F** Geranium *Pelargonium Fantasia*™ Strawberry Sizzle

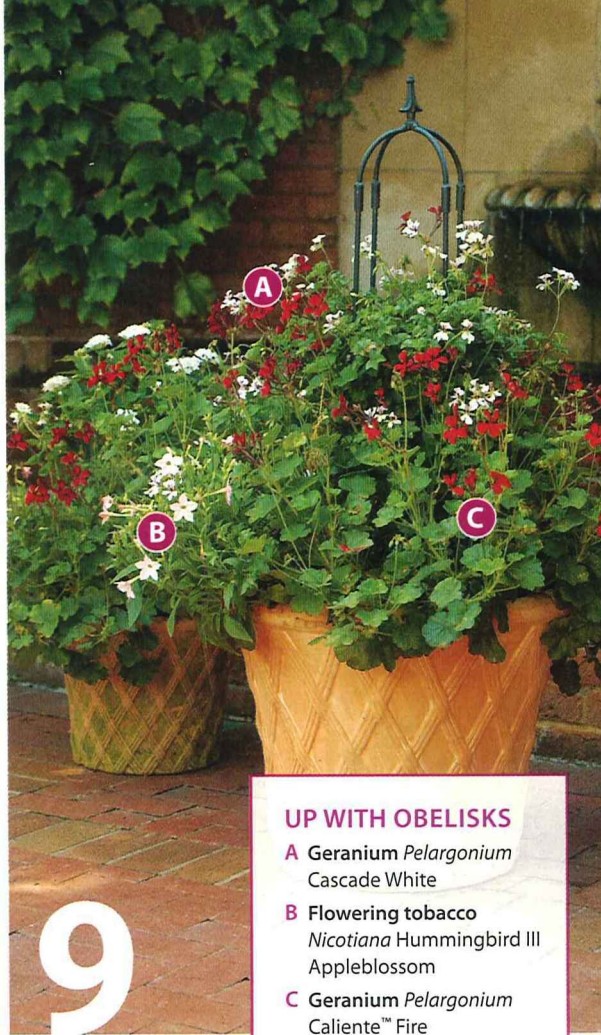
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I just showed you one twist on a container classic. But there are plenty of other exciting ways to use geraniums. Let's take a look at a few containers we put together at our test garden last summer.

8 TRY THE LATEST TREND IN CONTAINERS Succulents like quick-draining soil that's a little on the dry side, and so do geraniums — why not pair the two? You might think succulents would do well in blazing hot sun, but surprisingly, they don't. A little afternoon shade helps keep them happy. These plants are even less tolerant of overwatering than geraniums, so make sure they don't stay too wet and rot. If you're concerned about soil moisture, keep the succulents in their original pots with faster draining mix and sink them in the container.

Here, the pink-edged Kiwi aeonium picks up the pink of the geranium's flowers while the deeper shades of the echeveria and gasteria provide a strong contrast of both shape and color. And the geranium's bushy foliage hide the echeveria's leggy stems.

A succulent container doesn't have to be all about foliage: Replace traditional trailing plants with a showy moss rose. It's just as drought-tolerant as the other plants here and happily wanders over the lip of the container, blooming all summer long.



UP WITH OBELISKS

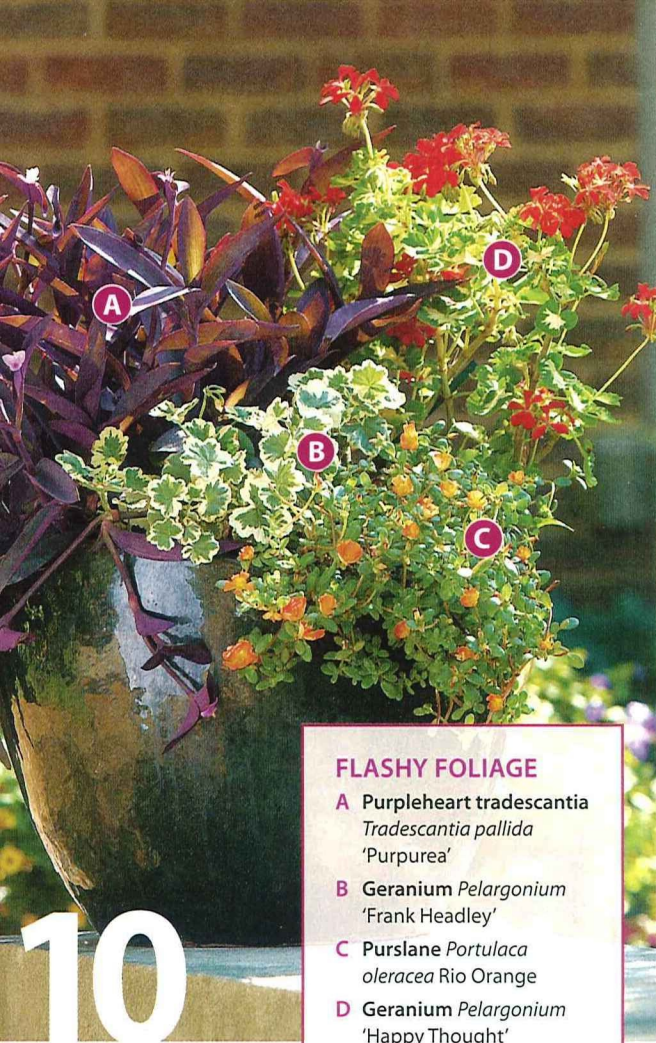
- A** Geranium *Pelargonium Cascade* White
- B** Flowering tobacco *Nicotiana Hummingbird* III Appleblossom
- C** Geranium *Pelargonium Caliente*™ Fire

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9 GROW UP AN OBELISK You've probably seen an obelisk in a container before, but sometimes the plants growing on them look a little spindly in comparison. On the other hand, if they're too vigorous, you can't even see the structure so you lose that formal feel you were trying to achieve. Ivy geraniums provide the solution. They're just the right size. For example, Cascade White above has plenty of pretty flowers and foliage to blend the obelisk in with the planting. Americana® Trailing Dark Red, Temprano™ Pink and Freestyle® Burgundy are some more of my favorites for growing on an obelisk.

Start by filling the container half full then placing your obelisk. That way it's anchored securely and you won't have to push the obelisk into the mix. Center the obelisk if the container is going to be viewed from multiple sides or place it towards the back if it will be viewed from one perspective. Add the rest of the potting mix and you're ready to plant.

Geraniums don't have a mechanism for climbing so you may need to help them get started up your obelisk. I made a lower ring of twine to hold these plants up until they started to stretch. In just a few weeks the plant had grown enough to envelop the lower portion of the obelisk.



FLASHY FOLIAGE

- A** Purpleheart tradescantia
Tradescantia pallida
'Purpurea'
- B** Geranium *Pelargonium*
'Frank Headley'
- C** Purslane *Portulaca*
oleracea Rio Orange
- D** Geranium *Pelargonium*
'Happy Thought'

10 FORGET FLOWERS — GO FOR FOLIAGE Geraniums are grown for their big, bright flowers, right? Not always. Some cultivars have foliage that's showier than the flowers. These two long-time favorites in the photo above are just as easy to grow as their floriferous counterparts but have interesting foliage instead. Upright 'Happy Thought' near the back has a creamy centered leaf and some showy blooms. Not all fancy leaf types have flowers worth bragging about, so go ahead and snip them off if they're too scrawny. In the lower half of the container you'll see 'Frank Headley' trimmed in white. It's smaller in size with a more mounded habit and salmon-pink flowers. If you don't like these two, there are many other cultivars available with different foliage markings. For unusual flowers to go with your out-of-the-ordinary geranium foliage, check out "Have you seen these?" at right. If you can't find them locally, you can get them (and other specialty geraniums) from the mail-order nurseries in the list at right.

Now that you know the secrets for growing geraniums, you can come up with your own traditional combos or create something on the wild side. □

— Sherri Ribbey