

## **Container Gardening – Andrew Mikolajski**

You might be forgiven for thinking a talk in August wouldn't get much in the way of attendance, but we had a packed hall of members and some non-members interested in learning more about container gardening. Andrew Mikolajski should know his stuff - he's written over 30 gardening titles, is a speaker and lecturer, an RHS judge, and a consultant for the RHS' A-Z Encyclopaedia. An enthusiastic and knowledgeable speaker, he took us

through his ideas for containers, plants and planting. He believes good gardeners have lots in pots. Mainly because their garden just isn't big enough! Containers have a role in garden design and there are tricks worth knowing:

- Pots of the same style dotted around create unity.
- Pots don't need to be the same size but stick to the same design.
- Plant in 3s, or 5s of the same variety or different plants. Cram bedding plants in.
- A heavy plant needs a heavy container.
- A fabulous pot requires minimal planting.
- Shallow containers need plants with shallow roots.
- With tall pots, put the plant in a smaller container sunk into the top section with stones in the base.

Seasonal displays, eg, spring bulbs, are ideal for containers. Don't plant them too early, particularly tulips. Keep in cold storage and plant later or get half price in the sales! Feed bulbs whilst growing.

Plants good for containers include:

- Japanese maples – oriental plants need an oriental container.
- Begonias – like damp conditions so water well and don't assume the rain will get through the leaves to the compost. "Fragrant Falls" is scented and the petals are edible! Hydrangeas also need watering well.
- Blueberries - the smaller variety contains higher anti-oxidant properties.
- Clematis – like their roots to be shaded so use other plants/pots around the base.
- Fig – prune in winter from bottom to top and keep to a minimum.
- Roses – keep well-watered whilst forming buds. "Warm Welcome" is long-flowering. Get them bare rooted and plant in November. Make sure the graft is buried below the surface.
- Other good container plants include Fuchsias, Hostas, Canna Lilies, Aucuba Japonica and Agapanthus.

After the theory came the demo. Andrew explained that plants are often sold in pots containing peat based compost. These inevitably dry out and it is impossible to rehydrate effectively. This affects the plant and its performance once replanted so he recommended soaking the pot and removing all the compost before planting afresh. To use the vernacular, when it comes to compost, "don't use crap!" - you don't really know what you're buying and the contents can vary from batch to batch of the same brand so use the cheap stuff for seasonal planting such as summer/winter baskets. If you want good quality compost, go for John Innes No 3 or ideally Melcourt. Never use compost straight from the bag – add perlite, and grit for long-term planting.

Andrew suggested putting polystyrene chunks in the bottom of the pot rather than stones and advised on breaking up the roots properly before planting.

One tip for container plants that suffer from the frost – put it in a bigger container and fill the gap with polystyrene or other material to keep them warm. For long-term planting, when the performance goes off, take them out in Autumn, trim the roots and put back using fresh compost.

You can re-use good compost if bulbs have been in it. Use coir blocks soaked in water in a ratio of 50/50 with the spent compost and use this mix for summer temporary bedding.

Fertilizers – don't need to be organic for pots. Use tomato feed to encourage flowering and for fuchsias in autumn to help them through the winter. Apply wood ash to fruit plants now.

Andrew's talk was very well received and he will return during the Literary Festival next year.