Seeds + Pots = Drama on the Deck

No self-respecting deck or terrace should be caught naked. That is, without a colorful container or three. Dress your outdoor space simply, beautifully, and inexpensively by sowing seeds directly into your patio pots. You can get a head start on the season by germinating seeds in the warmth of the indoors and moving the pots out after the last frost date. Or, create mini-greenhouses out of your containers by capping them with plastic on cold nights. Of course you can also just wait for warm weather, and enjoy the pleasure that comes from watching your container plants mature from seedlings to splendor.

A Few Theme Ideas

Herbal Trio

Courtesy of National Garden Bureau

Basil: Choose any one of the many attractive varieties. Some have serrated leaf margins, others are deep purple, and still others have diminutive leaves and a compact mounding habit. Large varieties require ample growing space. Thin to no more than three plants per pot. *Cilantro*: Cilantro is a fast maturing herb that can be sown fairly thickly; the attractive, shiny leaves will fill a large pot within 2 to 3 weeks. Shear the plants 2 to 3 inches from their bases and they will quickly re-grow, providing you a month, or even two, of salsa seasoning. *Summer Savory*: This very adaptable herb will become a mainstay in your kitchen and garden once you become acquainted with it. At full size, the plants are about 12 to 15 inches tall. Thin them to about 4 inches apart in a good-sized container.

Edible Beauty

Chard: Colorful ribs are most stunning when backlit by the sun, so position a chard container accordingly. Plants grow to 18 inches or more in height, and require roomy quarters. As your chard seedlings grow, thin them over time so that no more than three remain to mature in the pot. Use the thinned plants in soups and salads! *Mesclun or Lettuce Mix*: Salad mixes are as beautiful as they are tasty. Broadcast seeds fairly thickly, aiming for spacing of about ½ inch between seedlings. In about a month, the container will be so luscious you'll be reluctant to cut it. But do! Then give it a sprinkling of diluted fish emulsion, and the greens (and reds) will re-grow in no time at all.

Design Basics

Good design is crucial in a garden that plays out in a space that may be no larger than your powder room. Remember the basics:

Proportion and Balance: Simpler is often better. One large pot can make an impact on a small patio; larger spaces will accommodate a number of containers. Just be sure that they relate to each other in an orderly manner, and that the display is not too large or small for the space. Consider using pots of similar style or color in varying sizes, or same-size pots staged at different heights. For a formal entrance, a matched pair makes a strong statement.

Repetition: Multiple containers look "right" when some element in the design is repeated. This can be the style or material of the containers, the color of the flowers, the type of plant, or some other facet of the design.

Unity: Repetition creates a unified look. Harmony can also emerge from a planting theme: edibles, herbs, or grasses are three examples.

Nasturtium: A half dozen nasturtium seeds will quickly yield a container full of attractive edible leaves and flowers. Pick flowers daily and more will continue to develop.

Sunny Sensations

Courtesy of National Garden Bureau

Sunflowers: Dwarf sunflowers grow beautifully and quickly in containers. This is a particularly satisfying choice for children, as the seeds are large and the payoff is humongous. Sow 5 to 7 seeds per large pot and thin to the strongest three plants.

Marigolds: There's a reason marigolds are so popular: they are the ultimate in dependability. Choose the big blooms of African marigolds (*Tagetes erecta*), or the smaller French types (*Tagetes patula*). Signet marigolds (*Tagetes tenuifolia*) make a particularly elegant mound, thinned to about three plants per medium-sized pot.

Salvias: Salvias of all kinds are easily grown from seed, and many summon hummingbird visitors! Thin to 3 to 5 plants per container.

Cosmos: For best results look for dwarf varieties of *Cosmos sulphureus*, which are among the easiest of all flowers to grow. Thin seedlings to stand about 3 inches apart, and enjoy a long season of cheerful blooms. Deadhead the flowers regularly to keep plants looking good.

Calendula: This tough flower will thrive where others falter. Calendula (also called pot marigold) goes from seedling to bloom in not much more than a month. Thin to 3 to 5 plants per container. Petals can be harvested and used to give color to broth and flash to salads.

Sweet Peas: The advantage to growing sweet peas in pots is that you can give these fragrant beauties the excellent drainage, not to mention the early start, that they require. Look for cascading varieties, or construct a support. And sow early—they can take light frost. Protect seedlings from birds with netting and thin them to stand about 4 inches apart. Success will follow!

Zinnias: Dwarf zinnias thrive in containers. Plant a single variety per pot, or combine different types or colors for a more varied look. Zinnias germinate quickly and reach flowering stage within weeks.

Understated Style

Sometimes it's all about the pots. When you don't want to upstage an interesting container, choose an understated occupant.

Wheat grass: This grass will grow in any size container, and reaches the height of stylishness in less than two weeks. Trim (and juice) the blades of grass to keep your pots neat and attractive. And when tidiness gives way to disorder, start over.

Parsley: Triple-curled parsley makes any container look sophisticated. Parsley seed is notorious for slow germination, so be patient. For a lush pot of green, thin seedlings to 4 to 6 inches apart when they are at least 2 inches in height.

Sweet Alyssum: A blanket of low-growing white is easy to achieve with a pack of *Lobularia maritima* seeds. The fragrant flowers will spill daintily over the edges of your unique container. Thin seedlings to about 3 inches apart.