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Home > Advice > Creating beautiful pot displays with Primulas

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creating beautiful pot displays with primulas

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As some kind of consolation to a cold winter and late-to-arrive spring, you advise if you've got the oomph and a porch, deep window ledge or sheltered doorstep – invent your own kind of spring which will deliver everything you might have hoped for from the outside world. In the cold of 2013 I gave up waiting for nature and resorted to doing spring myself in pots. Using the latest primulas and polyanthus fresh from the garden centre, I've gathered together a collection for this missing season.

The first group is a mix of a new variety of polyanthus – Primula Primlet Series – which I've seen in several garden centres. In bud, the flowers are twisted to look a bit like a miniature rose and once fully open they're lovely, with flowers a bit neater, more cupped and ruffled than the usual polyanthus.

Ruffling is not something I usually like in flowers. I tend to avoid it in sweet peas and bearded iris and choose the ones with the straightest petal edge. But these primulas look good, less like a flat splotch of colour, more showy yet not too gaudy when compared with the standard.

They're scented, too – a soft, sweet rose, like the wild primrose – strongest in the sun or warmth They also flower for ages. They're advertised as flowering as a house plant for three weeks, but kept cool, they've done nearly three times as long. I have kept them on a table in the greenhouse with a visit for a few days into the warmth of the kitchen to admire them and they've been in flower now since the first week of February, so I think they're undersold.

All we've done is keep their compost moist and deadhead them and they still look as good as new. They're not reliably hardy so have been kept out of the worst of the frost and snow but our greenhouse is not heated. There's a good range of colours as bright as a coral reef or a sunny stained-glass window.

I've had them in a jumble of single colour pots of varying shapes and sizes and that's how I like them best, mixed up with other things: a pot of the rich velvet purple double-flowered polyanthus 'Belarina Cobalt Blue', a jug of the bizarre Narcissus 'Rip van Winkle' and a sprig or two of daphne. I can sense myself sort of sucking up the colour from them and feeling just a bit more cheery as a result.

Deeper colour

There are some bicolor forms in the Primlet Series – 'Lavender Shades' in mauve and white with veining (which I'd say is best avoided), a deep pink ('Rose') with a white edge, and I like 'Sunrise' in tones of a soft apricot to rich orange. I bought one or two of most of the others except the yellow and cream (the yellow of the wild single primrose can't be beat in my view) and love them all: Primlet 'Rose', 'Scarlet Red' (my three plants varying from claret to deep pink) and 'Purple', their buds a richer, deeper colour than the fully developed flowers which provides a good contrast.

They're about six inches tall, best when the stems lengthen out from the heart of the plant with each stem visible so they don't look too dense and dumpy. The 'Purple' is said to be the most vigorous.

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There are some other new primulas I've been experimenting with, too, the white-and-blue-veined 'Tie Dye' or darker blue 'Blue Jeans'. I would have thought this complicated, far-from-natural flower would be hideous, but it isn't. These are both hardy and look good in a larger pot that you could have on a doorstep mixed up with similarly delicate-looking spring flowering bulbs such as *Scilla siberica* and the smaller grape hyacinths.

I've planted 'Tie Dye' in a pot to contrast with *Primula* 'Belarina Cobalt Blue', and I like that, too.

Amber shades and white

Then there's *Primula elatior* 'Castillian'. This is a variety of amber colours with crimson markings breaking up the cartwheel flowers and I love it with that rich colour highlighted by the polyanthus 'Bordeaux'. I've had forced 'Prinses Irene' tulips mixed up in this pot in the greenhouse, too, now starting to go over, but the trio has looked good now for three weeks. I also have a crimson velvet container including 'Bordeaux' with the ever-brilliant *Primula* 'Gold Lace' which will be planted in the garden once they're over.

I wanted to experiment with a white window box or container and have been pleased with the combination of polyanthus with hyacinth and wood anemone. The planting recipe for this goes: seven pots of 'L'Innocence' hyacinth (one bulb per pot), five pots of *Anemone blanda* 'White Splendour' (five bulbs in each), and five polyanthus 'Snow White'. All are planted in a zinc window box 31in long and 7in deep. The cold has helped here as the hyacinths have looked good and smelled fantastic for three weeks already and are still showing no signs of browning.

Finally, a single plant of great delicacy, which has been in flower since the middle of January, is *Primula forbesii*, grown as an experiment from seed. This used to be a popular houseplant, along with *Primula malacoides*, but has gone out of fashion and so is now difficult to find (the Alpine Garden Society has had seed).

Having plenty of these colourful and rich textured flowers in prominent places in the garden and running down the centre of the greenhouse and kitchen table is as jolly as a shelf in an old-fashioned sweet shop. Just the lift you need until spring finally arrives.

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