

episode 59 show notes and advice

This week, Sarah and Arthur are discussing drought tolerant plants for containers. Arthur's whole garden is based around containers, and his wonderful book, *The Flower Yard*, shows how he creates a bold and brilliant show with his pots, growing plants from seed and using bulbs on a huge scale, all from a small urban space. Pots are a big part of the garden at Perch Hill too. Ten years ago Sarah had around 30 pots in the garden and now it's more like 300!

At this time of year, Sarah and Arthur plan which plants to grow in their containers and the combinations they'd like to try, thinking about colour, scent and form, things they've talked about on previous episodes. Today they focus on drought tolerant plants, sharing their top low-maintenance plants for pots that won't need lots of watering over summer.

In this episode, discover:

Take prompts from nature with Mediterranean herbs like oregano and rosemary

Why Arthur recommends the scented Pelargoniums 'Prince of Orange' and 'Attar of Roses'

How a botanising trip to South Africa inspired Sarah to try arctotis, and osteospermums in her pots

The best way to water pots including the system Head Gardener, Josie uses at Perch Hill

Drought tolerant plants for shade

Rhubarb cordial – a Perch Hill classic recipe

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Episode 59 advice sheet

Drought tolerance is something Arthur is thinking about a lot more compared to when he wrote *The Flower Yard*. Climate change is a big factor and as he doesn't have space for water butts to collect and use rainwater for watering, he is keen to reduce the amount of water he uses.

Herbs

[Herbs](#) are a massive family of drought tolerant plants, packed with scent and nectar for pollinators when in flower. Both Sarah and Arthur advise growing herbs on a large scale, using lots of plants if you can.

Sarah and Arthur's favourites:

[Mint](#) – Arthur is growing mint for scent and to arrange. He’s using an old galvanised duck bath as a trough, growing all his favourite scented mints – grapefruit, basil, strawberry, Moroccan – in sections. Mint likes being pot bound.

[Lavender](#) – Arthur is growing lots of lavender in troughs this year to see if it gives the same impact as the more high maintenance cut flowers.

Oregano – Sarah trialled three different coloured oreganos at Perch Hill last year - her [Oregano Collection](#) - and this year will cram this into a water trough and let it romp away. Oregano is one of the longest-flowering, wildflower-come-herbs you can grow, to stud your grass or border with purple flowers. Deadhead, cutting down to the base for flowers until October.

[Rosemary](#) – one of Sarah’s favourite herbs, not just for its flavour (so good with lemon chicken, potatoes, aubergine and of course lamb), but also as a garden plant. It gives great evergreen shapes to any garden and then lovely flowers in spring, with all-important nectar for early emerging bees. A traditional Mediterranean herb that can take a lot of heat and drought. Varieties like [‘Tuscan Blue’](#) and [‘Green Ginger’](#) are decked with pretty blue flowers.

Take prompts from nature

Taking cues from nature will help you choose good drought tolerant plants for pots. Plants that grow well on chalk downlands and coastal walks for example, or anything you’d find growing happily in the baking hot Mediterranean sun.

Top drought tolerant plants

[Echium vulgare ‘Blue Bedder’](#) – brilliant blue flowers, loved by butterflies and bees. Blooms for months, good in pots and makes a great cut flower.

[Dwarf Buddleias](#) – compact shrubs designed to be grown in pots, with showers of scented purple flowers that will be covered in bees and butterflies.

[Arctotis](#) and [Osteospermum](#) – Sarah was inspired to try these in pots at Perch Hill after seeing fields of them, like poppies in a corn field, in South Africa, when she was on botanising wild flower trip. New breedings come in a range of colours. She has also trialled gazanias are better grown in a greenhouse.

Arthur grew the scented Pelargoniums '[Prince of Orange](#)' and '[Attar of Roses](#)' in large terracotta containers. He didn't cut them back, brought them inside over winter where they did very well, with no aphids.

[Figs](#) – inspired by Arthur's use of figs, Sarah is trialling different figs in pots at Perch Hill this year, planted in large dustbins or dolly tubs.

The best way to water pots

The best, most time efficient way to water pots is to place them in a wheelbarrow of water, then take out and drain before placing back on tray or saucer. This enables water to gradually rise up the pot, instead of flooding out or sitting in the top few inches of soil.

Josie's system for watering pots

At Perch Hill, Josie Lewis, Head Gardener, has devised a watering system for the large number of pots they have. Pots are divided into areas, with 6-10 pots per area. Josie will go around an area, watering each pot from the top for about a minute or so. Then she will go round again giving each pot a second watering. The first watering rehydrates the topsoil so the second watering ensures the water will soak down the pot.

Bigger pots hold more water

Arthur recommends using larger containers. For his summer pot combinations, he packs away the smaller pots used for his spring displays and just uses the bigger ones that hold more water.

2 great drought tolerant plants for shade.

Pelargonium tormentosa – an underestimated plant that smells of peppermint with tiny moth like flowers that thrives in shade. Grow it for its big silvery green, felted, fragrant leaves. When the frosts come, bring it indoors where it will look splendid until it can go back out in the spring.

[Plectranthus cilatus 'Nico'](#) – a New Zealand ground cover plant. Dark green leaves with a beautiful crimson-purple underside. Not hardy but you can bring it in in the winter then put back out in May.

Rhubarb cordial

In middle of March one thing that is coming to life is [rhubarb](#) which Sarah loves growing.

It's a shade tolerant plant and is completely delicious in puddings and drinks.

Rhubarb cordial is a Perch Hill classic, served at all course lunches from now until July, with an interlude for elderflowers in May. Try adding strawberries to this recipe in July too.

The rhubarb is a beautiful colour, a pale opalescent pink, particularly delicious diluted with sparkling water, with plenty of ice and a few leaves of fresh mint. A squeeze of lime juice is also a good addition.

Makes 1 ½ litres

- 2kg rhubarb stems, roughly chopped
- 2 large oranges
- 8-10 whole star anise
- 600-1200g granulated sugar
- Citric acid (optional)

Put all the rhubarb into a large pan and add 1.5 litres of cold water (you don't want to cover it completely with water as this dilutes the flavour of the cordial). Using a potato peeler take 4 or so strips of orange skin from each orange, add this to the pan with the juice from both and add the star anise.

Bring the rhubarb up to the boil, then turn down the heat and simmer gently until the rhubarb is soft (it may look like a mush at this stage). Take off the heat and allow to cool for an hour.

Pour the rhubarb and juice into a large jelly bag (hanging over a large bowl) and allow the juice to drip through overnight.

Now pour the collected juice into a pan and on a low heat add the sugar (about 600-1200g, but do taste with a spoon as you go, so you get the sweetness you want, remember it will get diluted with water). Stir until the sugar has dissolved.

You can add 2 teaspoons of citric acid at this stage if you want to store this for several months, but this is not necessary if the cordial is going to be used straight away. The citric acid does give the cordial a good tart kick, or you can add the juice of 3 lemons for a sharper flavour.

Allow the cordial to cool.

Pour into sterilised bottles and store in the fridge. This should keep in the fridge for a couple of months, and can be frozen in ice cube trays to use throughout the summer.