

Container Shrubs for Habitat Gardens

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I've been writing a series on container gardening and this week we're going to discuss container plants that are great for habitat gardens. Desert Lantana (*Lantana macropoda*) is a small, white-flowering, habitat plant that provides nectar for numerous butterflies. The leaves are also utilized by the Gray Hairstreak and the Painted Lady caterpillars. The Texas Lantana (*Lantana horrida*) is also utilized by butterflies and the fruit is eaten by several bird species. Both of these lantana like full sun, good drainage, and are drought tolerant. They do well in clay pots and you should be careful not to over-water.

Another "must have" plant for habitat gardens is the Drummond's Turk's Cap (*Malvaviscus drummondii*). This red flowering shrub provides nectar for butterflies and hummingbirds. The leaves are eaten by the caterpillars of the Glassy-winged Skipper butterfly and several birds enjoy the fruit. You will have to keep this trimmed to about 2 to 3 feet, as this shrub will become very leggy if you allow it to continue growing. White Brush (*Aloysia gratissima*) is another shrub that I find invaluable in habitat gardens. The fragrant white flowers will fill the evening air so be sure to place this plant where you can enjoy it. (Not in the front yard for the neighbor to enjoy or on the side yard next to the trash can!) White Brush produces spikes of tiny flowers several times a year and provide nectar to bees and a variety of butterflies. Trim as a small tree or trim across the top to keep it in a dense shrub.

Manzanita, or Barbados Cherry, (*Malpighia glabra*) is another excellent shrub for habitat gardens. The lovely pink flowers become a cherry red fruit that is loaded with Vitamin C! The leaves are grazed by several caterpillars. This spineless shrub will tolerate some shade. Do not allow it to get leggy. Cut back in the fall to assure thick foliage. Shrubby Blue Sage (*Salvia ballotiflora*) is a favorite of mine. It has small clusters of blue flowers, aromatic leaves (mint family), is drought tolerant and provides nectar for several butterflies. The Painted Lady caterpillars will enjoy munching on the leaves. This plant should be kept at 4 to 5 feet in a container to retain a bushy shape.

Another favorite shrub is Texas Kidneywood (*Eysenhardtia texana*) which also has clusters of fragrant white flowers. It prefers full sun and, if you prefer, you can train it as a small tree. The leaves are utilized by several caterpillars and the nectar by butterflies and bees. Doves enjoy the fruit. Texas Baby-Bonnets (*Coursetia axillaries*) is another thornless shrub that provides seeds for several species of birds. The pink flowers are lovely and it provides excellent cover for small birds. This would be a good one to put near a bird bath.

Both Torrey's Croton (*Croton incanus*) and Low Croton (*Croton humilis*) will feed butterflies, caterpillars and seed-eating birds. The crotons prefer shade and are drought tolerant. These are just a few of our natives, that do well in containers, and provide for wildlife. There are others and I am sure you can get lots of good advise at the World Birding Centers and at Valley Nature Center. Local nurserymen carry these plants, as well. You will want to add compost to your potting soil. This will serve to keep soils well drained and provide what little fertilizer you will need. Remember, natives do not like lots of fertilizer, so a little goes a long way. In a container garden, however, provide some fertilizer, like the compost, and top dress a couple of times a year with compost.

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