

CHARLESTON GREEN

Southern Exposure

A Lowcountry piazza is a place of varied climates, where choosing the right plants for every space is key—from leafy shade lovers to fragrant fruit trees that thrive in the sun

Over the centuries, the Lowcountry has seen architectural styles come and go, yet the functioning porch endures as one of the most important elements of everyday life in the South.

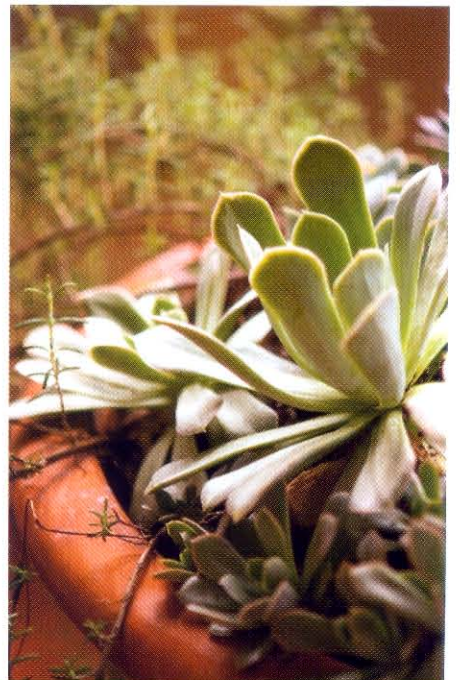
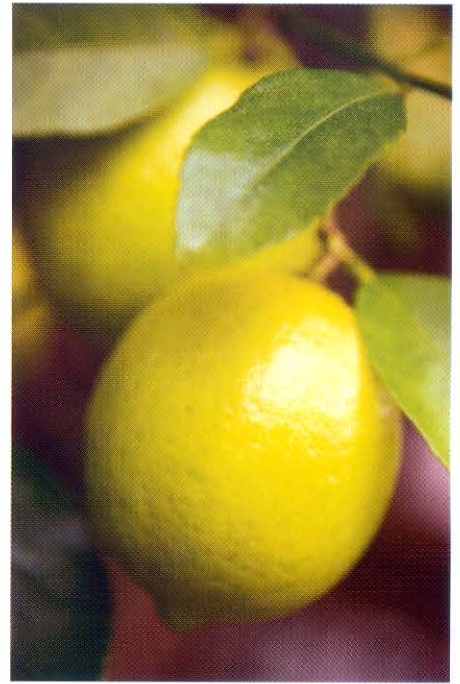
Known regionally as the piazza, this porch architecture is traditionally built onto the south or west side of the house. These side porches, while giving refuge from the elements, function as outdoor rooms facing the gardens beyond. Whether serving as a first and last glimpse of a home's very soul or a place of refuge to its inhabitants, the piazza's utility on one side of the house might be entirely different on yet another. Therefore, looking at these spaces as gardening opportunities is to see each as a stage with its own climate and its own growing requirements, both of which depend largely on its relationship to the sun.

Indeed, gardening on these covered outdoor spaces can be challenging. For container garden designer Tracee Lund, the

Potted citrus plants are sturdy, colorful choices for sunny verandas. This lime tree is paired with sprays of weeping rosemary, as well as sedums and echeveria. Opposite page: Oxalis, heucherella, and acorus make a good early spring combination, tolerant of moderate sun.







“FOR SUNNY SPACES, I LOOK TOWARD A MEDITERRANEAN PLANT PALETTE OR PLANTS THAT THRIVE IN DESERT-LIKE REGIONS.” —JENKS FARMER

challenges can turn into positives when you get to know the space. “You really need to know what kinds of conditions are typical of your porch. Does it receive full afternoon sun, baking everything day in and day out, or do you have a shady nook more reminiscent of a dark room in the house?” she offers.

Soaking Up the Sun

Fortunately, there are plants that can withstand the unforgiving rays of this region—you just have to know what they are.

“For sunny spaces, I look toward a Mediterranean plant palette or plants that thrive in desert-like regions,” says local estate horticulturist Jenks Farmer.

Above left: Drought-tolerant nolina spills from a brass funnel container; the evergreen arrangement is made colorful with decorative glass balls. Two full-sun staples are citrus trees, producing both fragrant flowers and a usable fruit, and echeveria, which adapts best to dry conditions.



Above: The brilliant red bract of Guzmania, a bromeliad, brightens shady porch spaces.

Right: On the list of tropicals that do well in shade is the pitcher plant, which requires cooler environs for the pitcher to properly cultivate nutrients.

"I like to start with a dominant feature in my porch containers. Citrus trees are favorites. Finding them in topiary form allows for height while leaving all the space below for other interesting succulents and sedums." Two of his favorites are Nagami Kumquat and Bearss Seedless Lime. During the cooler months, both bear a healthy crop of fruit displayed on lush green, leather-like foliage. "The best part is enjoying the fragrances from blossoms that show through the spring and the fall," he says. Another plus is that watering is required only on a weekly basis. "I don't water them until I see a little leaf curl. This is a sure sign that they are thirsty."

To fill out the container, Farmer combines Blue Boy prostrate rosemary, Black Prince echeveria, Flap Jack kalanchoe, and miniature sedums. The textures of all four lend great drama, creating a truly extraordinary combination that's surprisingly easy to care for. "These plants really require minimal



everything...water, fertilizer, and care. The water I give the citrus is enough to keep them all healthy. They require no pruning and can take a little shade as well as the hot afternoon sun," says Farmer.

For bursts of color, choose combination pots with annual and perennial mixes known for their tenacity when dealing with the blazing sun. A super combination

starts with blue plumbago, or 'Imperial Blue.' The deepest blue flower in the Southern landscape will pair up with the yellow leaved golden dew drop. In addition, this stunning duo will easily accept the fine-textured bamboo muhly, a perennial ornamental grass. Making this winning trio even better is the fact that it will attract affection from more than just

onlookers—both butterflies and hummingbirds will flock to the porch to enjoy the many delights these plants provide throughout the spring, summer, and fall.

Shady Places

“Making shady porch gardens work has everything to do with evergreens and mixing in different textures and pops of color,” says Lund. “I like looking for interesting leaf patterns that might repeat in a

feature of the house.” For example, the Grecian pattern plant, *Acanthus* ‘Summer Beauty’—with its coarse textured leaf—resembles the relief found on the wooden columns in the old architecture around town.

Lund also suggests looking for shrubby selections, plants that might normally be found growing in our Southern landscape under these darker conditions. “Some of my favorites include big-leaf camellias,

Japanese andromeda, and big-leaf fatsia,” she offers. “These three make great accent foliage in the container and they are all tried and true.” Further, all three have a distinct flowering period, lending themselves to added interest at other times of the year.

Yet another benefit to selecting evergreens is that they can sustain themselves in fairly dry conditions. Until they grow enough to fill their containers with roots, once a week is the most they will ever need to be watered. This low maintenance regimen is ideal for the porch. “Because there is no place for the water to go,” says Lund, “clean-up is much easier for plants that don’t require frequent watering.”

While a shrub will take up most of the container’s available space, you might consider finding a low groundcover to help fill out the display and add a different foliage texture. Opt for plants like English ivy, autumn fern, and dwarf mondo grass. “One big advantage here is that these groundcovers keep the soil from blowing out of the containers and making a mess on the porch,” says Lund.

As for tropical plants, bromeliads, bego-

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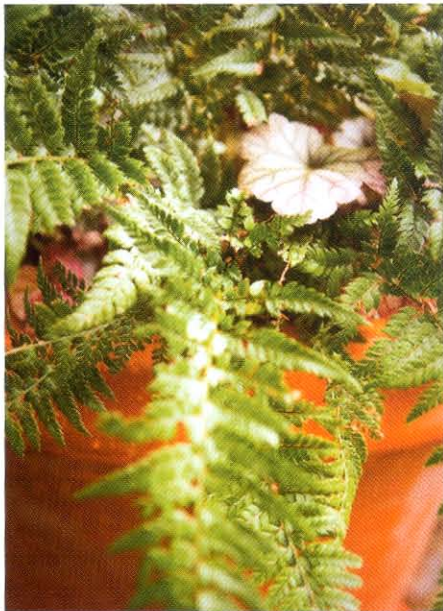


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Evergreen legustrum topiaries, along with container arrangements of English ivy and autumn fern, flank doorways and porch thruways.

STYLED BY TRACEE LUND



Potted evergreens are good picks for shady spots; the above container is planted with autumn fern.


nia, and ferns are all diverse groups with plenty of porch potential. Bromeliads, for instance, require very little soil space and grow well in cramped quarters, perfect for small containers or


Mother Earth

While ensuring the right sun and shade is key to good plant growth, so too is the choice of soil mix used in the containers. Soilless mixes, ideally lightweight and well-drained with good moisture retention, have all the qualities needed to grow plants on the porch. Lund offers Pro Mix Tree and Shrub as one option. "I use it because it contains some organic matter in the mix and the plants seem to like it," she says. There are several methods for fertilizing all season. When the weather gets in the 70°F range consistently, use a slow-release fertilizer like Osmocote that requires only a single application in mid-spring. Most are designed for six to nine months of release. Other methods include a liquid fertilizer like Peter's 20-20-20. This should always be used at the recommended rates to avoid leaf burn, which can occur due to heavy handedness with the measuring spoon.

in groupings. In nature, most bromeliads are terrestrial, tightly perched on above-head branches. With a more coarse texture than begonias or ferns, bromeliads work well as accents when used with the diverse leaf patterns in the fibrous-rooted begonia. Although grown for their foliage, begonias also flower—most often in late summer and fall. Finally, ferns—whether asparagus, rabbit's foot, or Boston fern—bring with them lush, green textures remi-


niscant of a tropical locale. Moderate watering and light fertilizing during the growing season is a must to keep these fast-growing combinations healthy.

It's tempting to try to brighten your shady porch with colorful annuals, but don't set yourself up for disappointment. According to Lund, "Flowering annuals just don't get enough light to bloom adequately. In fact, the stems will often stretch, looking for more sun. They just don't perform." 



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