

garden talk

A head for potted plants



Maria Cote

Picture a dozen seniors gathered earlier this month in an activity room at a retirement community. They're chatting and laughing across tables covered by spotless linen cloths.

These people aren't waiting for dinner. They're waiting to get their hands dirty. Instead of plates and table settings, pots of all shapes and sizes rest atop the linen.

Annie Huston, co-founder of Columbine Design in Englewood, has arrived at Holly Creek Retirement Community with bags of soil and dozens of plants. She supplies the materials for these growing artistic masterpieces at no cost, just as she does for nonprofit groups looking for a gardening demonstration.

Holly Creek residents need only have the canvas — the containers — in hand.

I'm listening in while Annie helps the crowd — made up mostly of women — create container gardens. No surprise: They all know a lot more than I do about how to create a stunning display.

Annie first asks the group about favorite container plants, and the answers fill the room: "Purple Wave petunias," "zinnias" and "million bells."

If this were a class, each student would get an A-plus.

"Million bells is a most perfect plant," says Annie, her accent still holding a trace of her native France. "It makes you want to get up in the middle of the night, just to run outside and admire it."

The Purple Wave petunias, she says, are impossible to kill. These new petunias, she notes, won't stick to the pots.



JEFFREY V. SMITH

Annie Huston, left, gives Holly Creek resident Lou Harding a few tips on planting a container garden.

"I like zinnias more than marigolds," she says. "The new zinnias don't get powdery mildew, and you don't have to deadhead them."

And the crowd gives thumbs up to geraniums, showy but sturdy, and coleus with its showy foliage. Verbena doesn't need to be deadheaded because the plant is "self-cleaning." Licorice plant is great with its gray-green foliage, and it smells nice, but contain it or it will take over your garden.

A few to avoid? The crowd agrees that those old-fashioned sticky petunias are too much trouble. And lovely lobelia does well up in the mountains, but down here you have to struggle to keep the plant alive.

Same with impatiens, which are called "water drinkers" in her native country, says Annie, a member of the Associated Landscape Contractors of Colorado. Plant pansies now, just expect to have to dig them up when the weather gets super hot mid-sum-

mer.

Cherie Stackhouse is the voice that votes "million bells" (calibrachoa) a great plant.

"They did well for me all last year, no matter what the weather," says the 79-year-old, who moved to the Centennial retirement community almost two years ago when her husband was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.

She welcomed the support of the Holly Creek community, especially after her husband died last summer. Activities like this gardening gathering keep the youthful-looking woman busy.

Gardening in small containers is ideal for seniors, Huston says. Lightweight pots are easy to move from sun to shade in the heat.

"And really, there are no rules to designing," she says. "Well, one rule: Drainage holes are a must. Other than that, there's no right or wrong. Do what makes you happy."