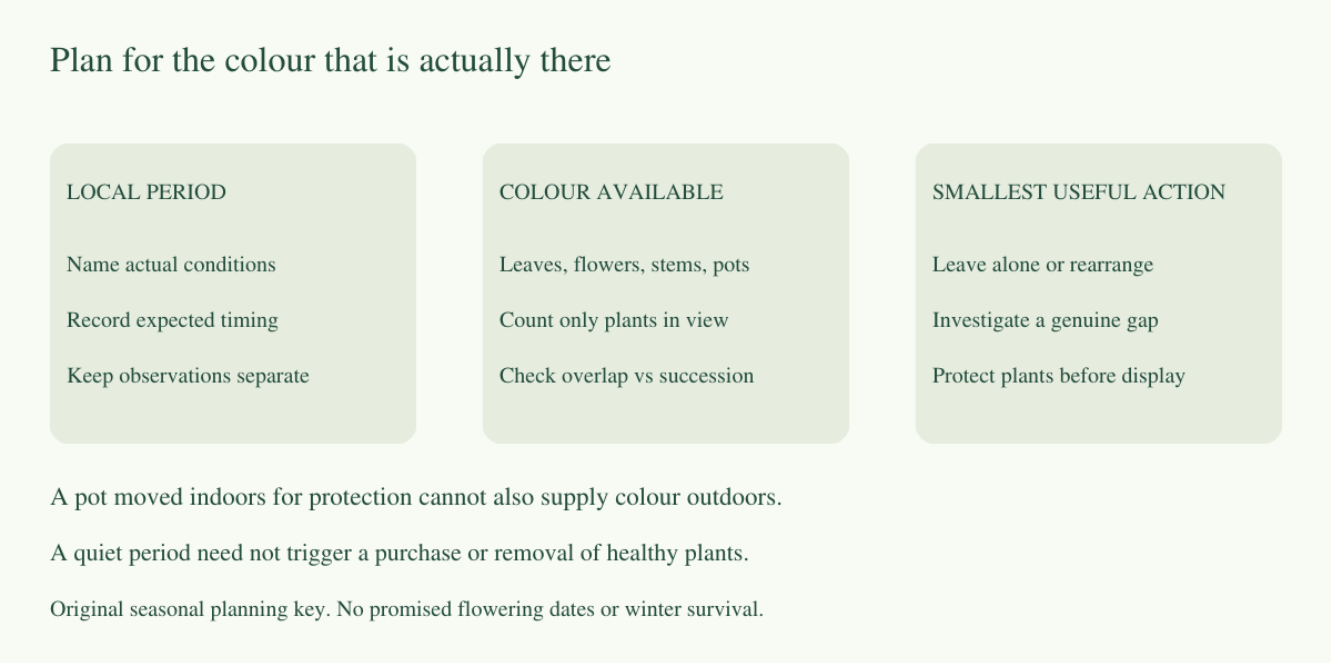
Choose a Small-Garden Color Palette Across Seasons

Steadleaf Press



A practical growing guide with observation tools and original planning examples.

A small garden changes colour even when you buy nothing new. Leaves emerge, flowers open and fade, stems become visible, and the pots themselves take a larger part in the view. Planning across seasons helps you enjoy those changes without treating every quiet period as a shopping problem.

Build a timeline around what grows well, then consider how to improve any period when you would welcome more colour.

Name the seasons your garden actually experiences

Begin with a few locally useful periods rather than fixed months. In a temperate garden these might be spring growth, summer flowering, autumn change and winter rest. Elsewhere, a cooler flowering period, hot dry stretch and wet growing season may describe the garden more accurately. Add or remove rows from the board to fit those periods; four is a worksheet example, not a requirement.

Write your own names across a page. Under each, note the conditions that affect your choices: frost, heat, rain, strong wind or the shade of nearby trees. Add when you are usually at home to enjoy the garden. A display planned for a month when you are away may deserve less of your budget.

Use local guidance for expected flowering periods, then refine the timeline with your observations. A catalogue photograph cannot promise when your plant will flower.

Keep expected and observed dates separate. “Usually flowers in late spring here” is a useful forecast. “First flowers opened on 18 May this year” is a record. Neither promises next year's exact timing.

Record colour beyond the flowers

Walk around the garden and list what supplies colour now. Include leaf undersides, new growth, seedheads where appropriate, stems, bark, containers and the wall or fence behind them. Note whether each feature is lasting, temporary or uncertain.

The RHS describes foliage as a source of extended colour and stems or bark as potential seasonal features, especially when flowers are scarce. Use that range when planning rather than expecting a small collection of plants to bloom continuously. RHS, Three ways to bring colour into your garden

For each plant, make a short entry:

- Name and variety:

- Leaf colour when newly growing:

- Leaf colour later in the season:

- Flower colour and expected flowering period:

- What remains attractive after flowering:

- What disappears or needs seasonal protection:

- Dates or conditions observed in this garden:

Do not assume that an evergreen looks identical throughout the year, or that every plant sold for foliage keeps its leaves through your winter. Record the named variety and the local conditions alongside the colour.

Choose a thread that can continue

Pick one colour or relationship you would like to recognise through the year. It could be deep foliage beside pale flowers, silver-grey leaves with warm pot colours, or a changing range of greens. The thread can remain while individual flowers come and go.

University of Georgia Extension encourages gardeners to choose combinations they enjoy and reduce competing colours rather than using every favourite at once. Apply that as a helpful editing choice, not a restriction on personal taste. University of Georgia Extension, Using Color in the Landscapes

Write one sentence: “The garden will keep ___ visible, with ___ appearing during ___.” For example, “The garden will keep dark foliage and warm clay pots visible, with pale flowers appearing during the main growing period.”

That sentence leaves room for seasonal change. It does not require matching every flower or removing a healthy plant because it blooms in an unexpected shade.

Make a season by season board

Use the board below as a working page. Rename the periods to match your climate. Enter plants you already own before listing possible additions. Mark each colour as observed, expected from a named source, or uncertain. Count it as part of the outdoor view only while that plant will actually remain there; a pot moved indoors for protection cannot also supply colour in the courtyard.

Local period	Colour already available	Temporary feature	Practical condition	Smallest useful action
First active growth	___	___	___	___
Main growing period	___	___	___	___
Later growth or change	___	___	___	___
Quiet or difficult period	___	___	___	___

Fill the last column with a decision, not necessarily a purchase. Options include leaving the arrangement alone, turning an existing pot toward the main view, moving a manageable container to another suitable position, or researching one plant for a genuine gap.

Under the board, keep a separate shortlist:

Possible addition	Period it would improve	Conditions it must tolerate	Existing plant it would complement	Decision
___	___	___	___	Buy, investigate or leave out

Use the shortlist to avoid buying several plants for the same brief period. Check timing as well as colour: two pale-flowered plants do not form a simultaneous pair if one finishes before the other starts. They may instead repeat the colour in succession. Write which effect you want, then compare their local bloom windows. If overlap is uncertain, treat it as a possibility rather than the basis of the whole scheme. Leave out candidates whose growing needs do not match the space.

Work through a sheltered courtyard example

Consider a fictional courtyard in a mild temperate climate. It has light shade, warm-coloured pots and a dark-leaved heuchera already growing well. The owner also has two separately potted flowering plants, one recorded as flowering earlier and the other later in the growing season.

Heucheras are useful candidates for foliage-led container plans. The RHS describes their range of leaf colours and suitability for light or dappled shade. It also cautions that some lose leaves in colder conditions, so year-round foliage depends on the variety and location. RHS, How to grow heuchera

The owner chooses dark foliage, pale flowers and the existing clay-coloured pots as the continuing relationship. Their board looks like this:

Period	Continuing colour	Changing feature	Decision
New growth	Dark and fresh green leaves; clay pots	Earlier pale flowers	Move the flowering pot into view when it is ready, if that position suits it
Main growth	Foliage and the same pots	Flowers overlap briefly	Enjoy the fuller display without adding another flowering plant
Later growth	Dark foliage remains the main feature	Later flowers fade	Keep healthy plants and let foliage carry the view
Quiet months	Pots and whatever foliage remains locally	Possible leaf loss during cold weather	Use a simpler display and follow the plants' protection needs

The owner considered buying a plant for every row, but the earlier and later flowers already cover their favourite periods outdoors. Pots and foliage can carry the quieter view.

If the heuchera loses more foliage than expected during a cold winter, that observation goes on the board. Next year's winter plan changes accordingly. Distinguish normal seasonal change from unexplained decline by checking guidance for the actual cultivar and conditions; do not label every loss of foliage as harmless winter rest. The plant is not discarded merely because the original colour forecast was too optimistic.

Keep healthy plants through the transitions

A change of season does not require emptying every container. Illinois Extension describes several options for seasonal displays, including changing only selected plants or rearranging pots so that those at their best are more visible. Illinois Extension, Container Garden Designs

Before replacing anything, ask:

1. Is the plant healthy and simply between attractive stages?

2. Does it have a suitable place to continue growing or rest?

3. Could a neighbouring pot become more visible while it changes?

4. Would the proposed replacement actually improve the missing period?

5. Can I provide the replacement's care, including any winter or dry-season needs?

For plants kept through cold weather, include a realistic protection plan. Illinois Extension explains that perennial roots in containers experience harsher cold than roots insulated by the ground. A plant's landscape hardiness alone does not guarantee survival in an exposed pot. Illinois Extension, Overwintering potted plants

Where protection requires moving a plant out of sight, allow the display to become smaller. Do not keep it exposed solely to preserve the colour scheme. Get help with heavy containers, and keep any temporary storage compatible with the plant's needs and building rules.

Review the board at the end of each period

Take a photograph from the same ordinary viewing place and add three short notes: what remained colourful, what appeared earlier or later than expected, and what you would keep unchanged.

Add a fourth note only when something needs action. For example, “The pale flowers were hidden behind new leaves” suggests a placement change. “The whole garden was quiet while we were away” may suggest doing nothing at all.

After a year, your board will contain more useful local information than a generic shopping list. Keep the plants and combinations that earned their place. Change the parts that were difficult to care for or failed to bring the pleasure you expected.

Sources and scope

- Royal Horticultural Society, Three ways to bring colour into your garden: foliage, flowers, stems and bark as sources of seasonal colour.

- University of Georgia Extension, Using Color in the Landscapes: choosing and editing colour combinations. Its seasonal examples concern north Georgia.

- Royal Horticultural Society, How to grow heuchera: foliage choices, light preferences and variable winter leaf retention.

- University of Illinois Extension, Container Garden Designs: selective seasonal changes and rearranging existing containers.

- University of Illinois Extension, Overwintering potted plants: cold exposure of container-grown perennials.

The board and courtyard example are adaptable planning tools. Flowering dates, leaf retention and overwintering needs depend on the actual plant and location. Check local noninvasive plant guidance before adding a new species, and plan for the garden you can care for through the whole year.