

Charming foliage

By Lauren Bloom

Sprout foliage color through every crevice and corner of the landscape.

As summer nears, I get excited for all the new trends and planning for the year to come. This year, foliage color is a continuing theme that is becoming easier to design as our plant palates bountifully expand. Forget flower color; foliage color is sprouting through every crevice and corner of the landscape. We see it in annual beds, perennial pockets and countless containers. Waves of chartreuse, silver and aubergine highlight the shades of summer green. Without this excitement of color and texture in foliage, our creative plant designs would lack lasting appeal throughout the season.

Here in Colorado we have the benefit of everything from shade trees to annual flowers readily available. In fact, it can be difficult to narrow down the choices. With thousands of varieties of coleus and hostas, and hundreds of varieties of heuchera and ornamental grasses, who could get bored? Nurseries and retailers are adding to the excitement, carrying more and more options from which to choose. This makes it easier to substitute and to try new things.

New, easy-to-use plant selections have emerged like *Sambucus nigra* 'Eva' (Black Lace elder), *Weigela florida* 'Verweig' (My Monet weigela), *Carex fageifera* 'Toffee Twist' ('Toffee Twist' sedge), *Vinca minor* 'Illumination' ('Illumination' periwinkle) and *Euphorbia x amygdaloides* 'Helena's Blush' ('Helena's Blush' cushion spurge). These can be used in pots or in planting beds without supplemental flowers. The



simplicity of the foliage is classic and timeless, and maintenance is a breeze. Some do have inconspicuous flowers, but they will not need the heavy deadheading that a typical perennial requires. Nor do they become tired-looking after a bloom season, as would an iris or campanula.

Through the past seasons I have seen great success with many shady perennial pockets where variegated hosta, frosted-looking ferns and deep purple heuchera spill over into seas of gold groundcover sedum. Shade perennials typically offer the most choices for a garden full of foliage color. Light up the shade with a bright plant like a variegated *Bergenia*, *Pulmonaria* or *Polemonium*. A large massing of assorted *Heuchera* under a shade tree will spice up the ground. Whether shade or sun, the right color between green foliage shows off each

Lysimachia 'Goldilocks', *Heuchera* 'Purple Petticoats' and *Hydrangea* 'Endless Summer' planted together bring out each other's beauty and soften the hardscape.

Photo courtesy Columbine Design

individual plant in a garden bed or pot. The translucence of *Acer palmatum* (Japanese maples), *Miscanthus* grasses and *Ipomoea* vines shining in the sunlight are enchanting alternatives to the same-old flowering plants.

In my opinion, the most exciting way to show off foliage is in containers. Placed at garden entrances, lounging patios or balconies, or tucked away in a garden bed, containers can easily be changed every year, every season or as often as your style changes. A perennial container including *Heuchera* 'Peach Melba' ('Peach Melba' coral bells), *Euphorbia* 'Purple Wood' ('Purple Wood' spurge), *Stipa tenuissima* (Mexican feather grass) and *Sedum repens* 'Angelina' ('Angelina' sedum) is a delicate, lasting arrangement. Colorful annual flowers such as *Canna generalis* 'Tropicana' ('Tropicana' canna lily), 'Sedona' coleus, *Oxalis* 'Charmed Wine,' ('Charmed Wine' shamrock), *Carex* ('Gold Fountains' sedge) and *Helichrysum petiolare* (licorice plant) create a pot with which flowering plants cannot compete. This sophisticated style of design, absent of flowers, makes it easy to use in many applications.

Foliage plants can soften large hardscape features. A subtle combination of *Lysimachia nummularia* 'Goldilocks'

The foliage of *Capsicum* 'Black Pearl' (ornamental pepper), *Diascia* 'Coral Canyon' and *Coleus* 'Pink Chaos' puts on a show in combination.



Miscanthus grasses

(golden moneywort), *Sedum spurius* 'Tri-colored' ('Tri-colored' sedum) and *Artemisia Schmidtiana* 'Silver Mound' ('Silver Mound' sage) soften jagged pond edges. In a garden border, *Iris pallida* 'Variegata' (variegated iris), *Euphorbia amygdaloides* 'Despina' ('Despina' spurge) and *Penstemon digitalis* 'Husker Red' ('Husker Red' penstemon) break up the monotony of bushy green perennials. They can even mimic colors from your stone patio or walk, extending the scheme of colors under your feet and into the beds; the terra cotta from a *Heuchera*, the beige from a plumed grass or the silvery-grey from a *Santolina*. Utilizing exciting foliage is the best way to combat the fleeting flowering perennial that will only give vibrant color a few weeks of the year.

Excitement about foliage goes beyond nurseryman and designers. Clients are seeing and requesting it. Many admire scenery from their favorite vacation spots and want to transplant the view to their home surroundings. Whether an urban apartment or grand estate, it can be accomplished.

Many popular landscape styles remove most flower elements and rely on their foliage to put on a show. An Asian garden is an inspiration of flowerless Zen texture and style. A large-leaved canopy of tropical palms, philodendrons and crotons creates a paradise that warms the air. Sunbathed rows of Mediterranean vines and cypress inspire relaxation. Even conifers can add sparks of blue and silver and give a texture that stands alone throughout the year. These themes are all possible with the plethora of new and traditional foliage plants. My own travels have proved inspirational to my designs, making the concept of 'imitation of nature' so much more appealing.

This year, whatever foliage plant we use, it certainly will not lack color!

—Lauren Bloom is a horticulturist and award-winning garden designer on staff at Columbine Design, in Englewood.

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