

Beauty Beyond Blooms – Really!

By George Graine, Fairfax Master Gardener

Perhaps our best hope for gardening as an art is that gardening is an activity whose never-achieved aim is progress towards a never-completed work of art.

–Geoffrey Charlesworth in The Opinionated Gardener (1988)

Recently I saw a horticultural trade publication advertisement extolling the virtue of beauty without blooms. I think it should have said “beauty beyond blooms.” To be sure, this is an interesting departure from the usual approach to gardening. Most of us are taught that flowers are the key element for the garden, aside from magnificent trees and shrubs. The problem is that flowers are transient, and it is difficult to orchestrate four seasons of color.



photo: G. Medeiros

Hostas, ferns, hydrangea, aucuba, holly, and euonymus combined in a foliage garden

Perhaps it is time to give foliage a break, especially when considering the longevity of foliage compared to most flower blossoms. If you have successfully planned a garden to produce a succession of blooms, that is all for the good. But how many of us have been able to do that, especially when coping with fickle Mother Nature? Experience tells us you cannot realize an excellent succession of flowers without a lot of effort and, often, without some fair financial resources.



photo: Ray Novitske

Variegated Canna “Pretoria”

Think about this for a moment. Foliage can be subtle or powerful, depending on your leafy palette. With an infinite variety of leaf forms, you are sure to find many to suit your taste in design. That said, the horticultural breeding hype about the plant du jour makes it easy to overlook the beauty of foliage.

With careful recognition of flower production and a lot of work, you can surely have a colorful display. But is choosing a riot of color or a single-palette of color all there is? Of course not! When the flower is finished, you should have interesting-shaped leaves of many sizes, textures and colors. Aside from these attributes, many foliage plants have vertical and horizontal stripes, sprinkles, mottled patterns and unexpected variegation. No doubt, with careful plant selection and an eye toward foliage, you will add zest to your garden and landscape.

Foliage is a critical design element for the garden and ought to be factored in regardless of sun, shade and other environmental variables. Perhaps it is time to put to rest the idea that foliage plants should be

relegated to only a natural shade or woodland garden. That is pure nonsense. Challenge yourself by combining flowers and foliage to create a mood that reflects your tastes, not the preference of some famous landscape designer. Having an awareness of what plants will look like and knowing flower color and foliage will ensure that you achieve a balance that suits your personality and sense of design. Of course, you need to account for environmental conditions, soil quality and the like. Sometimes it can even be an interesting challenge to push the boundaries beyond accepted cultural “requirements,” such as a plant-hardiness zone.

What beauty beyond blooms boils down to is not complicated; it is a blend of factors that create harmony between you and your garden. Strive for year-round interest beyond the growing season, and, at the same time, employ principles of good design. Do not lose sight of your property variables such as a severe slope, rocky soil or a need for screening. Know the habits of plants before you install them. Often overlooked is the fact that plants grow in two directions – in height and in width. Have in mind whether you desire an informal or formal appearance, a Japanese-like setting, or any other type of look because this will have great bearing on your choice of plant material.



photo: Ray Novitske

Variegated Canna “Pretoria” Variegated foliage of Solomon’s Seal

Go for it! This is your garden. Be creative. Be bold.

Be strategic. By mixing plants with unusual foliage, you are bound to create visual interest because foliage is much more than just a bunch of green leaves.

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Grainethumb’s Favorite Foliage Plants

Trees

Dogwood: Cherokee Sunset (partial sun)
Japanese maple: weeping red or green (partial sun)
Japanese maple: Autumn Moon (partial sun)
Beech: Tri-color (partial sun)
Ginko (sun)

Shrubs

Smoke Bush: Royal Purple or Golden Spirit (sun)
Harry Lauder’s Walkingstick (sun)
Nandina: Flirt, Plum Passion (sun)
Boxwood: Elegantissima, Golden Dream, Wedding Ring (partial shade)
Hinoki Cypress: (sun)
Azalea: Bollywood (partial shade)
Weigela: My Monet (dwarf), Midnight Wine (dwarf), Fine Wine, French Lace (sun)
Yucca: Color Guard, Gold Sword (sun)

Perennials

Brunnera (partial shade)

Hosta (partial shade)

Heuchera/Heucherella/Tiarella (partial shade)

Lamium (partial shade)

Ajuga: Burgandy Glow (partial shade)

Ivy: Gold Heart, Sulphur Heart, Glacier, Fluffy Ruffles (partial shade)

Wild Ginger (partial shade)

Variegated Solomon's Seal (partial shade)

Variegated Pachysandra (partial shade)

Variegated Vinca minor: Illumination, Sterling Silver (partial shade)

Variegated Iris (sun)

Ornamental Grass: dwarf varieties (sun)

Painter's Palette (sun)

Houttuynia cordata 'Chameleon', best to constrain in a container (sun)

Tropicals (must be overwintered inside)

Caladium: (shade)

Canna: Pretoria, Tropicanna, Stuggart (sun)

Colocasia (Elephant Ear): Mojito, Illustris, Black Coral (sun)