



Lighting Up with Foliage

Variegated and silver foliage can be the foundation for a garden that shines all season long.

BY HEATHER PRINCE

THOUGH NOT considered colors in the same way as, say, red and blue, white and silver can be equally powerful in the garden. They can evoke a feeling of serenity, provide welcome brightness in shade, or add a sense of sophistication and elegance. “It doesn’t have to be bold to be beautiful,” says Paul Zammit, a professor of horticulture at Niagara College in Ontario,

Resembling forget-me-nots, the flowers of *Brunnera macrophylla* ‘Jack Frost’ bloom for weeks as the silver-washed, heart-shaped foliage shimmers in the shade. This tidy, clump-forming perennial thrives in dry shade beneath trees. Its foliage, which doubles as a sophisticated addition to cut flower arrangements, looks good well into fall.

Canada, and former director of horticulture at the Toronto Botanical Garden. “There’s a real beauty in whites and silvers. It’s subtle, but impactful, cool and calming. It can really create an atmosphere.”

Of course, there are myriad white flowers available from beloved heirlooms to hot new cultivars, but for lasting power over the growing season, use foliage to

provide structure, texture, and color. This is especially important if you're creating an evening or moon garden to be enjoyed in low light. When silver foliage is paired with white flowers, you can layer in even more nighttime enjoyment.

THE MANY SHADES OF WHITE AND SILVER

"White" foliage in plants is never white in the way that flowers can be. In leaves, the predominant color is generally green, with splashes, splotches, stripes, or edges in white that have undertones of yellow, pink, blue, green, or purple. Combining variegated plants with those whose foliage or flowers share the same color as the undertone is a good way to create a harmonious display. Using too many variegated plants in one space, however, often results in an overly busy design.

Similarly, "silver" refers to a palette of grays. "Silvers exist in a range of tone from slightly gray-green or glaucous to gray to bright almost—but not quite—white," says Karen Bussolini, co-author, with Jo Anne Gardner of *Elegant Silvers: Striking Plants for Every Garden* (Timber Press, 2005). "That makes silver plants easier to blend with each other and pick up tones from other plants in the garden. I always want plants to 'talk' to each other, to have a reason to be planted together."

In addition to color, silver foliage gives us interesting textures that beckon for touch. "Because silver is an adaptation to harsh conditions, silver plants often have distinctive characteristics and forms common to plants that evolved under those conditions," notes Bussolini. "Many silver plants have very linear or small leaves, or a velvety texture. Desert plants like yuccas and agaves are boldly architectural. Succulents with leaves that hold water come in shapes and sizes that contrast with green leafy plants."

COOL COMBINATIONS

White or silver foliage naturally brightens shady nooks. "I will weave plants with bright foliage throughout a darker space to lighten it up," says Janet Draper, horticulturist for the Mary Livingston Ripley Garden at the Smithsonian Gardens in Washington, D.C. "I like to use plants such as white-variegated *Carex* 'Everest' or *Brunnera* 'Jack Frost' with its silvery, reflective foliage, or any hosta or *Polygonatum* with white variegation. Ma-



Designer Susan A. Roth softens the edges of these stone steps with silvery Japanese painted fern (*Athyrium niponicum* var. *pictum*) and Serbian bellflower (*Campanula poscharskyana*).

ny of the newer rex-type begonias are just gorgeous, with white or creamy foliage, often with the addition of silver."

Variegated trees or shrubs make good focal points, and some can be grown as hedges. Most require full sun to part shade. "Variegated Japanese aralia (*Fatsia japonica* 'Variegata') is one of the few large evergreens that stands out in low light," says Lucy Hardiman, a nationally recognized garden designer in Portland,

Oregon. "Underplanting it with small-leaved groundcovers knits the plants together." A terrific texture plant for warmer climates, this broadleaf evergreen is hardy in USDA Zones 8 to 10 and tolerates dry shade. It grows six to eight feet tall and wide, with huge, palmate glossy leaves splotched with cream.

Bringing silver foliage together with other colors also affects how we perceive those colors. "Pair pastel pink flowers with



Above: The knee-high, upright, silver foliage of *Schizachyrium scoparium* 'The Blues' and the tall airy flowers of *Panicum amarum* 'Dewey Blue' bring out the luster in the pink flowers of *Echinacea purpurea*, *Eutrochium maculatum* 'Gateway', *Eutrochium dubium* 'Little Joe', and *Phlox paniculata* 'Jeana'.

Right: This study of contrasts pairs the warm, cream-edged foliage of Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum odoratum* 'Variegatum') with the fine-textured, cool blue-gray foliage of shredded umbrella plant (*Syneilesis aconitifolia*).

silver foliage, and they become more luminous," says Bussolini. "Light blues echo the coolness of silvers; creamy and light yellow blossoms make a subtle warm/cool contrast." But don't forget green. "I remind people that green is the foundation that supports everything," says Zammit. "Solid, rich green anchors it all together."

Gardeners with limited space or without a yard can find plenty of white and silver foliage plants to enjoy in con-





Above: Silvers of different weights and shades play off each other as this ghost plant (*Graptopetalum paraguayense*) tumbles in front of the coarse upright blades of *Agave* 'Blue Glow' along a set of steps in a California garden. Top, left: Daisy bush (*Brachyglottis greyi*, syn. *Senecio greyi*), a broadleaf evergreen shrub native to New Zealand, has fuzzy silver foliage that begs to be touched. Top, right: This green-and-white caladium ties into the white urn and is softened by the feathery sprays of maidenhair fern (*Adiantum* sp.)

tainers. "In containers, I like white and silver plants to be the specimen," says Zammit, who designed plenty of containers when he was at Toronto Botanical Garden. "A large-leaved plant, like *Caladium*, goes best with a fine-leaf plant, such as a maidenhair fern (*Adiantum* sp.) or asparagus fern (*Asparagus densiflorus*). Put them in each other's faces and make them nice and friendly for best effect."

SO MANY POSSIBILITIES

With so many variegated and silver plants out there, you won't lack for options in the garden. Try plants in different spots until it works for you. "If the plant is not happy where it is, or you don't like it, use that shovel and move it!" says Draper. "That is what gardening is all about! Keep planting and refining, but be sure to relax and enjoy the serenity you have created once in a while!"

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Above: The dramatic silver spikiness of *Yucca rostrata* 'Sapphire Skies' sharply contrasts with the sunset-colored *Kniphofia* and the creamy silver-and-white blades of *Aloe wickensii* in this drought-tolerant California garden.



Left: This intimate private garden designed by Christine Froehlich feels more spacious thanks to a palette of silvery-white foliage and the contrasting shapes of two variegated dogwoods: *Cornus kousa* 'Wolf Eyes', right, has an upright, treelike habit, while the billowy *Cornus alba* Ivory Halo®, left, has a compact, bushy form.