

Perennials with Fabulous Fall Foliage

IN TEMPERATE regions of North America, deciduous trees and shrubs tend to get all the attention when it comes to fall foliage, but they're not the only options for color in the autumn garden. Herbaceous plants, too, can produce beautiful hues that rival those of their woody-stemmed cousins, adding an extra level of interest to late-season beds, borders, and even container plantings.

As with trees and shrubs, the fall colors of perennials can be hard to predict, because they depend on so many different

Many herbaceous perennials and grasses give deciduous trees a run for their money when it comes to colorful fall foliage.

BY NANCY J. ONDRA

factors. The pigments that produce leaf colors can vary from site to site depending on the light intensity and soil conditions, and from year to year, depending on the weather conditions. Sunny, dry, and cool days tend to bring out the most dazzling colors; in mild and cloudy or rainy weather, the colors are often much more muted, and early, sudden frosts can stop the show before it even begins.

Still, there are some perennials that you can count on to produce a good fall foliage change—from their usual green to brilliant red, intense orange, golden yellow, or even all three—before they turn brown



Above: *Geranium* 'Brookside' is a hybrid cranesbill that produces small, dark blue flowers in summer; in autumn its deeply-cut leaves turn red-orange. **Opposite:** The bright yellow foliage of feathery Arkansas bluestar (*Amsonia hubrichtii*) lights up this perennial border.

and dry as the plants go dormant for winter. Cool fall temperatures can also bring out different colors on perennials with ever-present foliage, such as heucheras, turning greenish purples to a saturated near-black or bringing out a red or orange cast on those with summer-gold foliage.

Along with the typical border perennials that offer terrific fall color, ornamental grasses and even some ferns are invaluable for supplementing the late show with their changing leaves. There's also another group of plants that you might not think of for autumn interest: succulents. As tempera-



tures start to dip into the 40s, many succulents can develop foliage colors as glorious as those in any New England woodland, so even gardeners in the arid West and Southwest—where autumn foliage is not generally a phenomenon—can enjoy the splendors of the fall season, with the added advantage of the colors lasting for months instead of days or weeks.

SHOWY HUES FOR SUNNY GARDENS

Sun-drenched sites tend to show the most vibrant fall foliage hues. Some perennials are best known for turning specific colors, but almost all of them may show multiple colors depending on the specific site and weather conditions in any given year. Bluestars (*Amsonia* spp.), for example, are renowned for their bright yellow fall foliage, but they can also be blushed with orange, red, or even purple. This unpredictability is one of the things that makes fall gardens such a delight. You don't know exactly what you're going to get, but you know it's going to be good!

Still, being aware of what colors certain plants are likely to turn helps you to make the most of fall-color features in beds and borders. If you find that your autumn plantings are too heavy on the yellows, for instance, you can replace some of them with reds and oranges for variety.

Among the typical border perennials you can count on for yellows and golds (and sometimes orange hues too) are burnets (*Sanguisorba* spp.), daylilies (*Hemerocallis* spp.), monkshoods (*Aconitum* spp.), Siberian iris (*Iris sibirica*), and true lilies (*Lilium* spp.). For the red to purple range, look to cushion spurge and Griffith's spurge (*Euphorbia epithymoides* and *E. griffithii*), dwarf fleecelower (*Persicaria affinis*), hardy geraniums (*Geranium* spp.), and hardy plumbago (*Ceratostigma plumbaginoides*). Many peonies (*Paeonia* spp.) can grace your garden in a range of fall foliage colors.

For yellow to gold in native-focused plantings of sun-loving perennials, consider Culver's root (*Veronicastrum virginicum*), Joe-Pye weeds (*Eutrochium* spp.), milkweeds (*Asclepias* spp.), and purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*). Some options that typically turn red to purple include gayfeathers (*Liatis* spp.), prairie smoke (*Geum triflorum*), and tall coreopsis (*Coreopsis tripteris*).



Growing eight to 12 inches tall, 'Dimity' dwarf fleecelower (*Persicaria affinis*) makes an attractive groundcover. Here it is paired with lamb's ears (*Stachys byzantina*).

Many of the ornamental grasses that thrive in full sun will bring dramatic fall foliage changes to gardens in many regions of the country, including the West and Southwest. Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*), New Zealand wind grass (*Anemanthele lessoniana*), northern sea oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*), prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*), and purple moor grass (*Molinia caerulea*) are generally in the yellow to orange range, while flame grass (*Miscanthus 'Purpurascens'*) tends to turn a rich orange-red, big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*) is deep red to purple, and frost grass (*Spodiopogon sibiricus*) can be anything from gold to orange to red to purple—sometimes all at

once. Seed-grown plants of switch grass (*Panicum virgatum*) and little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) have the potential to produce a range of fall foliage hues, while vegetatively propagated cultivars more reliably have specific colors, such as rich yellow on 'Heavy Metal' and 'Northwind' switch grass and red to burgundy on Blue Heaven ('MinnBlueA') little bluestem.

Brilliant sunshine also brings out the best show in succulents as temperatures drop in fall—particularly in the species well adapted to dry, mild climates. 'Sticks on Fire', a selection of pencil cactus (*Euphorbia tirucalli*) is famous for its striking cool-season change from green to scarlet-red, which



Top: Switch grass (*Panicum virgatum*) provides a warm glow in this garden in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Above: Native to eastern North America, Culver's root (*Veronicastrum virginicum*) looks like yellow flames in the author's Pennsylvania garden. Left: *Euphorbia tirucalli* 'Sticks on Fire' is a tender succulent that takes on a brilliant hue with the onset of cooling days. In warm regions like Southern California, shown here, the color can last through winter.

TOP: SAXON HOLT. BOTTOM LEFT: CATRIONA T. ERLER. BOTTOM RIGHT: NANCY J. ONDRA



The red-orange foliage of American ipecac (*Gillenia stipulata*) and the soft purple flowers of aromatic aster (*Symphyotrichum oblongifolium*) in fall bloom create a charming late-season vignette with the tall seedheads of Deam's orange coneflower (*Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *deamii*).

is sometimes called Firesticks or fire sticks. Campfire crassula (*Crassula capitella*) offers a similarly eye-catching spectacle on a lower, more-spreading plant, while rosette-forming echeverias (*Echeveria* spp.) can turn a more-intense blue or can blush with pink to purple.

Cold-climate gardeners can enjoy colorful succulents too, either by growing those tender species in pots (for overwintering indoors) or by choosing hardy species with terrific autumn foliage, such as the red-tipped golden yellow of 'Gold Nugget'

hens-and-chicks (*Sempervivum* hybrid), the orange-tipped yellow of 'Angelina' sedum (*Sedum rupestre*), or the bronze to red shading on two-row sedum (*Phedimus spurius*, formerly *Sedum spurius*).

AUTUMN COLORS FOR SHADY BORDERS

Even if sun isn't abundant in your yard, your garden can still end the growing season with a bang. Some hostas (*Hosta* spp. and hybrids), for instance, can produce broad, bold spots of gold as long as frost holds off. 'Frances Williams', 'Halcyon',

'Krossa Regal', and 'Patriot' are a few personal favorites for particularly good color. Other options for elegant yellows in some shade include goat's beard (*Aruncus dioicus*), Solomon's seals (*Polygonatum* spp.), and northern sea oats. Cinnamon fern (*Osmunda cinnamomea*) and royal fern (*O. regalis*) are excellent for rich gold to orange, while 'Brilliance' autumn fern (*Dryopteris erythrosora*) can bring touches of copper.

Reds and purples may not be abundant in summer shade, but as temperatures drop, perennial foliage can contribute some of the showiest hues of the growing season. Some plants to look to in this color range include American ipecac (*Gillenia stipulata*), Bowman's root (*G. trifoliata*), bergenias (*Bergenia* spp.), foamy bells (*×Heucherella*), foamflowers (*Tiarella* spp.), Hakone grass (*Hakonechloa macra*), mukdenia (*Mukdenia rossii*), and rodgersias (*Rodgersia* spp.).

Other must-haves for shade can contribute a variety of colors. Barrenworts (*Epimedium* spp.), for example, might turn gold, orange, red, or burgundy—sometimes with several colors on the same plant. More perennials with potential for multiple colors include dwarf goat's beard (*Aruncus aethusifolius*) and shade-tolerant hardy geraniums such as big-root geranium (*Geranium macrorrhizum*) and wild geranium (*G. maculatum*).

FANTASTIC FALL COMBINATIONS

Great fall foliage color on hardy perennials is more than an incidental bonus feature. It can be an integral part of your seasonal plant partnerships, to complement or contrast with other fall-garden features. Here are some ideas for dynamic autumn pairings:

- Use fall-yellow foliage, like that of Arkansas bluestar (*Amsonia hubrichtii*), to echo the yellow centers of late-blooming daisy-form flowers such as giant daisy (*Leucanthemella serotina*) or 'Sheffield' chrysanthemum (*Chrysanthemum* spp.), for example.

- Plant tall grasses with bright yellow fall foliage, such as 'Cloud Nine' switch grass (*Panicum virgatum*) as a background for pink, purple, or blue flowers, like those of asters (*Symphyotrichum* spp.) or azure monkshood (*Aconitum carmichaelii*).

- Repeat the rich colors of autumn fruits and berries—such as those of rugosa rose (*Rosa*

HOW TO DESIGN FOR FALL FOLIAGE COLOR USING HERBACEOUS PERENNIALS

Few of us can dedicate an entire border to just one time of year. Fortunately, nearly all perennials that have fabulous fall foliage also have attractive features for other seasons, such as beautiful blooms or distinctive leaf textures, for spring and summer interest. So, if fall color seems like one too many factors to consider when you're designing a new perennial bed or border, look



first to the main features you want to focus on. Then, as you live with your garden and get to know how your existing plants perform in each season, you can think about replacing some of the single-season perennials with those that have



Many perennials with colorful fall foliage, such as 'Sarah Bernhardt' peony, also have wonderful attributes in other seasons—in this case, large, pink, double flowers in spring.

showy fall foliage to complement the late-season leaves, flowers, seedheads, bark, and berries of the others. In the meantime, visit local natural areas, botanical gardens, and nurseries with display gardens to observe the sorts of autumn colors you can expect from perennials in your area, and to get ideas about which would look good in your own yard.

Perennials with great fall color are welcome wherever you can work them in: throughout beds and borders, as ground covers under deciduous trees and shrubs, or in mass plantings. Containers, too—either diverse large planters or collec-

tions of smaller, individual pots—offer yet another way to display the best that fall-colored perennials can offer.

As autumn progresses, foliage colors develop at different rates on different plants. To keep things looking fresh, you may want to cut back perennials as they pass their prime. I usually remove plants that are insect damaged or tattered or toppled by fall storms. Consider leaving as much as possible in place, though, as the brown and black “skeletons” of past-prime perennials can make those that remain look all the brighter, and they may offer shelter to overwintering insects and nesting materials for birds. —N.J.O.

rugosa), winterberry holly (*Ilex verticillata*), or viburnum (*Viburnum* spp.)—with an underplanting of bergenias (*Bergenia* spp.), hardy geraniums, or heucheras with leaves in the same color range.

■ Put an unexpected twist on the season by pairing a low-growing, fall-colored perennial with a late-flowering bulb: colchicums (*Colchicum* spp.) rising through the showy autumn foliage of hardy plumbago (*Ceratostigma plumbaginoides*), for example, or prairie onion (*Allium stellatum*) popping up between clumps of prairie smoke (*Geum triflorum*) or red-leaved sea thrift (*Armeria maritima* 'Rubrifolia').

■ Dress up a slope or other dry site with an eye-catching tapestry of succulents that offer outstanding cool-season colors, such as hens-and-chicks and many sedums. Interplant with drought-tolerant,

silver or blue-leaved partners, like aloes (*Aloe* spp.) and yuccas (*Yucca* spp.), or bronzy New Zealand sedges, such as *Carex flagellifera*, for extra color and texture.

■ Don't forget about fall color in your containers! In a shade garden, the yellow-striped leaf blades of golden Hakone grass (*Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola') look marvelous spilling over the edge of a planter all summer, then take on a pink to reddish blush in autumn. It's perfect for underplanting a fall-colored dwarf shrub such as 'Munchkin' oakleaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia*). In a sunny location, pair a compact, upright or arching, warm-season grass—'Shenandoah' switch grass (*Panicum virgatum*), with wine-red fall foliage, is one of my favorites—with a yellow or orange mum (*Chrysanthemum ×morifolium*) for eye-catching color.

One of the unique things about fall gardens is that anything goes as far as color is concerned. You might not combine pink with red or bright orange with baby blue in summer, but in autumn, the natural color changes just seem to work together. Remember that green, too, is still valuable in fall combinations. Plants with deep purple to burgundy foliage, like that of black mondo grass (*Ophiopogon planiscapus* 'Nigrescens') or 'Platt's Black' New Zealand flax (*Phormium* hybrid), also make excellent partners for bright fall-colored partners.

With a little creativity in your combinations, your late-season garden can be just as glorious in autumn as it is in the first flush of spring bloom or the height of its summer splendor. 🍂

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