



ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY JANET DAVIS

The Allure of Black



Whether it's foliage, flower, or furniture, black is the epitome of fearless style in the garden. Sophisticated and a little sexy, it creates visual interest beyond the abundant green palette offered by nature. True black, of course, is not produced by plant pigments, but hybridizers have come very close by selecting for the darkest purple, maroon, green, and bronze leaves or flowers.

Plants with dark leaves arrayed against a paler background create an impressive bit of stagecraft. Handled carefully, these dark shades offer dramatic contrasts in a planting scheme while anchoring neighboring pastels or a palette of bright colors. But use too many and they can dominate the scene, becoming black holes at twilight.

Dark-leaved shrubs and trees especially should be carefully considered since they become a large focal point in the garden, drawing the eye at the expense of plants with more subtle hues. Beyond leaves, of course, their flowers

Like the perfect little black dress, black is always in style in the garden, no matter the season.

Top left: *Helleborus* 'New York Night'. **Top right:** *Fagus sylvatica* 'Purple Fountain'. **Opposite page:** *Colocasia esculenta* 'Black Magic' with *Cyperus alternifolius* at Montrose Garden in Hillsborough, North Carolina.

also change the color dynamic when they bloom.

Among shrub choices to consider is the large ninebark *Physocarpus opulifolius* 'Diabolo'™ ('Monlo', USDA Hardiness Zones 3–7), with purplish-black leaves and clusters of white flowers in late spring followed by attractive reddish seedheads. The dark leaves of black elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*) Black Beauty® or the finely dissected leaves of Black Lace® (Zones 4–7) contrast strikingly with the large pinkish-white flower clusters. The redleaf shrub rose (*Rosa glauca*, Zones 2–8) looks darker when grown in light shade. Give it a spot at the back of the border where its arching branches, small pink flowers, and profuse orange autumn hips can be appreciated.

For gardeners wanting a tree with dark foliage, the weeping beech *Fagus sylvatica* 'Purple Fountain' (Zones 4–7) is both narrow and fairly small, maturing at 25 feet tall and 15 feet wide. Its lustrous, purplish-black foliage covers the cascading branches.



ADDING DRAMA TO THE SPRING GARDEN

There are opportunities to show off dark flowers and leaves in the garden from spring to fall. In the hardy spring bulb department, the classic dark horse is the single late tulip 'Queen of Night' (Zones 3–8). It works well sprinkled through a mixed bulb planting where it leads the eye as it unifies other colors. Another dark choice is the double late tulip 'Black Hero' (Zones 3–8), a sport of 'Queen of Night'. And gardeners should find a spot in the border for Persian lily (*Fritillaria persica* 'Adiyaman', Zones 5–8) with its elegant spires of indigo-black.

Inky darkness in the spring border can be conjured up with several perennials, beginning with hellebores, or Lenten roses. A plant breeder's dream, they have become justifiably popular in recent years with several sporting jet-black flowers, including *Helleborus*

Left: *Anthriscus sylvestris* 'Ravenswing' in a spring border at Horticulture Centre of the Pacific, Victoria, British Columbia. **Bottom left:** *Viola* 'Bowles Black'. **Bottom right:** *Tulipa* 'Queen of Night'.

×hybridus 'Onyx Odyssey' (Zones 4–8) and *H.* 'New York Night' (Zones 4–9). Violas with dark flowers such as *V. cornuta* 'Back to Black', 'Bowles Black', and Sorbet® 'Black Delight' (Zones 6–11) add old-fashioned charm to the spring border or to containers. For those who can contend with its wandering ways, the lacy black foliage of biennial cow parsley (*Anthriscus sylvestris* 'Ravenswing', Zones 6–10) topped by airy white flowers makes an interesting counterpoint to the late tulips and daffodils.

CONTRASTING THE HOT COLORS OF SUMMER

As spring warms into summer, there are many dark irises to tempt us, including the bearded iris (*Iris ×germanica*) 'Before the Storm' (Zones 3–9), best grown in full sun, and the aptly-named black or gold-marked iris, *I. chrysographes* 'Black Form' (Zones 3–9), which thrives in part shade and damp, acidic soil. Various black-flowered columbines (*Aquilegia* spp., Zones 3–9) lend their ephemeral charm to the late spring garden, as if a



BLACK DÉCOR PAINTS A STRIKING BACKDROP

Plants aren't the only way to add dramatic dark contrast to the garden. Gates, fences, and walls finished in black or dark charcoal act like stage sets, themselves fading into the background while highlighting the plants around them. That can be especially vivid when, for instance, the white trunks of birch trees are profiled against a black board fence.



A black frame for a curtained patio matches black window shutters in artist Bev Stableforth's garden, Creemore, Ontario.

Every garden needs a place to sit and relax, read, dine, or just contemplate the leafy surroundings. Black iron bistro chairs, stained Adirondack chairs, classic Lutyens benches, sleek black chaise lounges, a black resin sofa dressed up with tropical-themed cushions—all offer subtle design touches that can play well with nearby flora.

Touches of black can be incorporated into garden art and accessories. Black urns, pots, and window boxes offer dramatic possibilities, especially when paired with plants with dark leaves. A tall, black-stained wood obelisk—or



A glazed black pot with *Calibrachoa* 'Aloha Kona Dark Red' and *Melianthus major* at Chanticleer Garden, Wayne, Pennsylvania.

even a small, black iron version—makes an emphatic statement, whether hosting a vine or merely used as ornament. Black window shutters can pick up the color theme of an adjacent patio. And any number of small art pieces can extend the dark motif throughout the garden: metal blackbirds on stakes, astrolabes, wall hangings—the list is endless.

hundred dark-winged moths took flight. *A. vulgaris* var. *stellata* 'Black Barlow' is well known, but there are numerous other black-petalled hybrid columbines.

If pools of lustrous, low, dark foliage are what you seek, heucheras with their frilly, mounded leaves are ideal. Good choices include *Heuchera* Primo® 'Black Pearl' and *H.* 'Dark Secret' (Zones 4–9). Before their yellow summer flowers appear, dark-leaved ligularias such as *Ligularia dentata* 'Othello' (Zones 3–9), 'King Kong' (Zones 4–9), and 'Britt-Marie Crawford' (Zones 4–8) combine

Before the yellow flowers emerge, the dark foliage of *Ligularia dentata* 'Othello' contrasts nicely in spring with Siberian irises and alliums. Garden design by Sara Katz.



nicely with June purples and mauves. For damp spots, the brownish-black foliage of the white snakeroot (*Ageratina altissima*) cultivar 'Chocolate' (Zones 4–9) provides contrast to its white flowers. Native to Japan, black mondo grass (*Ophiopogon planiscapus* 'Nigrescens', syn. 'Black Dragon', Zones 6–9) has become a design staple for path edging. It's stunning paired with the chartreuse foliage of *Sedum rupestre* 'Angelina' (Zones 3–11).

Later in the season, there are the maroon-black flowers of the heritage hollyhock (*Alcea rosea* 'Nigra', Zones 3–9). In late summer, bugbanes or snakeroots in the Atropurpurea Group with their wands of scented white flowers such as *Actaea simplex* 'Brunette' (Zones 3–8) and 'Black Negligee' (Zones 5–8) take center stage—and attract loads of bees,



Above: *Alcea rosea* 'Nigra'. **Top right:** *Pennisetum purpureum* 'Tift 8'. **Right:** *Ipomoea batatas* Sweet Caroline Raven™ 'NCORNSP-024SCRI' with a peach-colored calibrachoa in the background.

too. They are especially lovely paired with sweet coneflower (*Rudbeckia subtomentosa* 'Henry Eilers', Zones 4–8), whose dark centers echo the bugbane foliage.

FADING TO BLACK IN AUTUMN

As summer draws to an end, there is one final, serendipitous chance to paint with black. Or, perhaps, that should be "daub" in the pointillist style, since the black seedheads of many prairie composites seem like black dots on the large garden canvas. Beyond the visual pleasure they offer, goldfinches and other



Sources

Brent & Becky's Bulbs,
brentandbeckysbulbs.com.

Bluestone Perennials,
bluestoneperennials.com.

Digging Dog Nursery,
diggingdog.com.

Plant Delights Nursery, Inc.,
plantdelights.com.

Schreiner's Gardens,
schreinersgardens.com.

White Flower Farm,
whiteflowerfarm.com.

birds enjoy eating the seeds of plants such as purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*, Zones 3–8), 'Goldsturm' black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *sullivantii*, Zones 3–9), and great coneflower (*R. maxima*, Zones 5–9). For best effect, site these plants in front of a



Autumn seedheads of *Echinacea purpurea* offer dark accents alongside the yellow fall foliage of amsonia.

tall ornamental grass that turns yellow in autumn, like 'Cloud Nine' switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*, Zones 5–9).

In the garden, as in life, a little drama can add a lot of style. And given the tendency of seductive black colors to steal the show, a little black plant or two might just be perfect in your garden. ■

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TENDER BLACK PLANTS FOR COOL-CLIMATE DRAMA

Cold-climate gardeners can draw on a palette of dark-leaved annuals, tropicals, or tender perennials to add to perennials and shrubs. Like other tender plants grown outdoors in colder regions, they must be brought indoors well before frost threatens.

Purple fountain grass (*Pennisetum setaceum* 'Princess Caroline', Zones 8–10) has dark purplish-brown leaves, as does purple elephant grass (*P. purpureum* Graceful Grasses® Vertigo® 'Tift 8', Zones 8–11). The brownish-black cylindrical seedheads of *P. glaucum* 'Purple Majesty' (Zones 8–11) are like dark exclamation points against lighter colors and persist until sparrows finish dining on the seeds! Not only does the ornamental pepper *Capsicum annuum* 'Black Pearl' (Zones 9–11) have glossy, black leaves, its shiny, marble-sized fruit is also jet-black. From the amaranth family comes Joseph's coat (*Alternanthera dentata*) featuring dark cultivars like 'Rubiginosa' and 'Purple Knight' (Zones 9–11).

For other forms of tender dark foliage consider the trailing sweet potato vine (*Ipomoea batatas*) cultivars like 'Ace of Spades' (Zones 10–11), 'Blackie' (Zones 9–11), Solar Power™ Black Heart 'Balsolabart' (Zone 11), and Sweet Caroline Raven™ 'NCORNSP-024SCRI' (Zone 11). Taro or elephant ears such as *Colocasia esculenta* Royal Hawaiian® 'Black Coral' (Zones 7–11) or 'Diamond Head' (Zones 8–11) with their big, heart-shaped leaves make an emphatic statement in containers or beds.

Tender succulents and bromeliads offer dramatic possibilities, especially for containers. Look for the dark maroon *Aeonium arboreum* 'Zwartkop' (Zones 9–11) and *Dyckia* hybrids like 'Burgundy Ice' (Zones 7–11) or 'Grape Jelly' (Zones 8–11). Gardeners wanting to make a bigger splash can use dark-leaved cannas like *Canna indica* Tropicanna® Black with orange flowers, or *C. 'Australia'* (Zones 7–10) with bright-red flowers. Lush Rex begonias like 'Fireworks' (Zones 10–11) and 'Black Knight' (Zones 10–12) have big,



Dahlia 'Bishop of Llandaff'

purplish-black, veined and patterned leaves that look stunning in a shady spot; once summer ends, they make great houseplants. Even the humble petunia (*Petunia* spp.) has become a dark-petalled diva, including cultivars like 'Black Velvet' or yellow-striped black 'Phantom' (Zones 10–11); with the right companions they can turn the smallest window box into a dramatic vignette.

There are a few tender bulbs and tubers to add to the roster. One with very dark spring foliage is 'Sparkling Burgundy' pineapple lily (*Eucomis comosa*, Zones 6–9), its straplike leaves forming a basal rosette from which emerges a tall summer spire of rose-pink flowers. Though the foliage turns olive-green at flowering time, it usually darkens again in autumn. Several dahlias feature dark leaves, including the bee-friendly Bishop series. With its single or semi-double red blossoms, the *Dahlia* 'Bishop of Llandaff' (Zones 8–11) offers dramatic contrast between leaf and flower. The Wink series of dahlias come in many flower colors, including 'Happy Single Wink' (Zones 8–11) with bright-pink flowers with a red central ring. *D. 'Ellen Houston'* (Zones 8–11) has jet-black buds that open to fully double, salmon-orange flowers above dark leaves.