

Hot Garden Trend: Season-Long Foliage



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Pooped out on gardening ideas by fall? One of the hottest up-and-coming trends is fabulous foliage. People are spending less on gardening, and the plants they do buy have to offer interest through fall," said Anthony Tesselaar, cofounder and president of international plant marketer Tesselaar Plants. "With many flowers done by this point, those gardening on a budget are making sure the leaves left are worthy."

Interest in foliage is clearly there, according to the USDA's 2012 Floriculture Crops Summary, which showed a 4.6 percent rise in foliage plants bought between 2011 and 2012. But how do you incorporate foliage into your landscaping and container gardening? Here are four ways from Tesselaar and other experts.

Consider color

"Color is the best jumping-off point to start your new adventure," write Karen Chapman and Christina Salwitz in their new book *Fine Foliage* (\$16.95, St. Lynn's Press). The book offers 60-plus foliage combos for every location and purpose. "Begin by reading the color cues provided by key plants; then use them to establish color echoes with one another," they write. "Once you have your color link, vary the texture and form of the plants."

In their plant recipe "Foliage Fiesta," for instance, the *Tropicanna canna*, 'Finger Paint' coleus and 'Golden Ray' New Zealand flax (*phormium*) all sport shades of red, orange, green and cream. But the plants all offer different forms and textures, from the ovate leaves of canna to the serrated shields of coleus to the tough, spiky swords of New Zealand flax.

"Shrubs steal the show in fall," said About.com Gardening Guide Marie Iannotti: "They're also the most likely to still be around in nurseries." For attention-grabbing color, she suggested 'Henry's Garnet' sweetspire, gold-leaved caryopteris and late-season ornamental grasses like prairie dropseed, red switch grass and blue oat grass.

Allen Owings, a professor of horticulture with Louisiana State University's AgCenter in Hammond, La., also suggests adding ornamental grasses to your landscape design, as well as coleus, copper leaf plant (acalypha) and tapioca (cassava). For those in colder climates, he admits, some of these choices may need to be overwintered or bought in spring for season-long color.

Go dark

"Dark foliage is great any time of year, but it particularly suits the fall color palette," said Iannotti. "The clear jewel colors of fall flowers are all the more striking next to the newer, dark sedums like 'Chocolate Drop'. Near-black colocasias and cannas, like Tropicanna Black, are at their peak now and look amazing with a backdrop of gold or rusty tree leaves."

Salwitz and Chapman like dark-leaved varieties of euphorbia as well as coral bells like 'Obsidian' and 'Purple Ruffles'. For Halloween, they suggest super-dark plants like black mondo grass and the 'Black Pearl' ornamental pepper, which contrast beautifully with orange pumpkins.

Tesselaar recommends using Tropicanna Black cannas: "The rich broad leaves are one of the darkest colors in the cannas and they really add interest in the garden where planted, or when used as a centerpiece in a large mixed garden pot."

Owings loves dark alocasia and purple and black-leaved ornamental peppers like 'Purple Flash' and 'Black Pearl'. "Dark purple and black flowered petunias also go well with Halloween and Thanksgiving-colored landscapes," he added.

To keep your garden from feeling like a black hole, however, Salwitz and Chapman suggest pairing dark beauties with brighter leaves, which act as an uplight or high contrast.

Vary plant forms"Form refers to the overall size and shape of a plant, using terms such as mounding, columnar, vase-shaped or prostrate," write Chapman and Salwitz in *Fine Foliage*. "A garden that has 'flat lines' can be dull and uninteresting, whereas adding contrast in form can be used to move the eye through a space, make a visual statement and break up an otherwise predictable composition . "

This is where tall or architecturally striking plants come in, said Tesselaar. He's especially fond of the mounding, strappy leaves and long, sturdy flower stalks of Storm agapanthus (lily of the Nile). In *Fine Foliage's* recipe "A Change of Pace," agapanthus foliage serves as an ideal contrast to golden bamboo's tall, willowy feathers and aeonium's thick, fleshy carpet.

For strong forms, Tesselaar also turns to cordylines. For a graceful, rounded, fountain effect, he recommends the basal-branching Festival Burgundy. For a more upright, spiky, narrow structure, there's the 8- to 9-foot-high Burgundy Spire.

And don't forget the trees and shrubs, added Iannotti, noting their

availability in fall: "Shopping in fall lets you see exactly how they will fill out, whether they will elegantly weep or droop like a ninebark or beautybush or billow like a dappled willow."

On the other hand, cautioned Owings, a plant that gets too tall or wide can whack out of proportion with its supporting players in landscape design. "Know the mature size, including height and spread."

Contrast textures

"In garden terms, we use the word 'texture' to describe a surface, both visual and how it feels to the touch," Chapman and Salwitz write. "Without the contrast of different textures, the composition will look unexceptional."

In the recipe "Jewel Box," Festival Burgundy cordyline's long, narrow, strip-like leaf inks a bold, dark line across a mound of 'Gay's Delight' and 'Freckles' coleus, Persian shield and golden Hinoki cypress. In "Brushstrokes," feathery ferns serve as the perfect foil to bolder coral bells. And in "Warm and Fuzzy," velvety Rhododendron pachysanthum pairs brilliantly with glossy orange hair sedge (*Carex testacea*).

"Probably the biggest mistake home gardeners make is falling in love with plants that have soft, fluttering leaves or frilly foliage," said Iannotti. "Borders need spiky phormiums and big-leaved ligularia and bananas." Many of the bolder, spikier plants aren't hardy in cold climates, she noted, but they can be brought indoors, either as houseplants or stored dormant.

"Festival Burgundy cordyline performs exceptionally well as a houseplant," said Tesselaar. "Unlike many indoor plants, its leaves won't dry out because of forced-air heating."

The texture of plant materials depends on the size and disposition of the foliage, explained Owings. "Plants with large leaves that are widely spaced have coarse texture; those with small, closely spaced leaves have fine texture. Extremes in texture that prevent harmony in the composition should be avoided. On the other hand, some variation is needed for variety."

Tesselaar Plants searches the world and introduces new plants for the home garden, landscape, home decor and gift markets. Tesselaar undertakes extensive research and development of its varieties and, once they're selected for introduction, provides marketing and promotional support through its grower and retail network. The Tesselaar philosophy is to introduce exceptional plants while "making gardening easy" for everyone, so it makes its products as widely available as possible. Tesselaar believes the more gardeners there are, the better it is for everyone.