

Beauty on A Budget

When we admire books and magazines devoted to beautiful gardens, gardens that are glorious month after month with no dejecting ‘down time’, we become dismayed as we look out our windows. Then we give ourselves a ‘reality’ shake reminded that every garden can have its moments of beauty year round, just not in the proportions provided by unlimited time and money spent to achieve the results pictured on those elegant slick pages. We remember that small is beautiful and perhaps one Japanese maple is enough?

Looking at the calendar a few weeks ago, I realized it was time to look for the snowdrops. I searched but couldn’t find them. Had they departed, or just been delayed? They were not eaten as they belong to the Amaryllis family, like daffodils, critter proof. There is always another reward for looking. This time it was a hellebore with more blooms than it has ever had and of a deep soft purple. I’ve not had luck finding the right spot for these winter bloomers. In truth, I’ve not tried, since I needed them to bloom where I put them, a most dreadful attitude for one who loves plants.

Modest bulbs, these snowdrops pop up amid a scattering of brown leaves, sometimes caked with melting snow, and will be followed by early daffodils, a few surviving iris species. Snowdrops, *Galanthus*, need to be protected from space grabbing species. I should move these tiny bulbs and put them with that healthy hellebore. They are as Irish as clover having a three-lobed white bell hiding green designs on the inner segments. The later blooming bulb that resembles the snowdrop is *Leucojum aestivum*, a single white bell with green tips.

It would be good to have such a wealth of plants that no month is without an expanse of color, but we do have color year round just not in abundance. Those fortunate few do who are full time gardeners but the rest of us, whose days are designed for other vocations, can visit public and private gardens, read about them, study the texts, and in our own small space, in those few hours wormed out of a tight schedule, can manage to create enough of an Eden to cheer and delight us.

Everyone seems to have a gene descended from the Greek god, Antaeus who would lose his strength if prevented from having a foot on the earth. We too need to be grounded. There is no one-plan-fits-all for gardeners. For years you may plant pink azaleas, pink daylilies, pink roses, then suddenly pull them out and plant orange everything! There are no rules for planning your personal space. The plants, trees, shrubs, perennials, bulbs, annuals, grasses will have preferences in their genes for habitat – soil pH, moisture, sun or shade. But they too are living things and therefore capricious. So the first lesson may be “Plants die!” You may have killed them but quite possibly you did every horticultural practice correctly. Plants die.

Plants also relocate without permission. Hardy geraniums will do that, as well as black-eyed Susans, coreopsis and larkspur. Unless you are a strict disciplinarian, you will let them be, acknowledging that in their own way they are expressing a rule of garden planning, repetition. We know this of course, that a drift of plants is a more attractive design than one or two plopped here and there. In the same way, the use of golden or lime green foliaged plants should echo throughout the garden beds, not stand alone, evoking a ‘what is that there for?’ reaction. The repetition of shrubs or groups of perennials unifies the garden and gives it a sense of movement.

Another unifying factor is using the same hardscape. If you decide to use gravel paths choose a single kind and color and if some of your paths are mulched, repeat that treatment as well. If you use white picket fences in one place it may look odd to switch to chain links woven

with green plastic in the next space. If you need the dog run or a pool fenced in chain links, encourage vines or plants with flowers or interesting foliage near them and they will melt into the background.

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