

Plants That Stay Low

After a season when *Phlox paniculata* loomed overhead instead of staying down in the spaces where they belonged, gardeners are looking for small treasures that will spread horizontally not vertically. *Sempervivums*, (that you may know as hens and chickens), fill the bill!

We 21st Century gardeners occasionally think we invented everything that is newly in fashion. Roof gardens, for example, are being talked about as if they were a sudden solution to provide insulation atop buildings. They are not a new idea; in the 800s Charlemagne issued an edict that directed that each house have *Sempervivums* on its humble roof.

Sempervivums have been written about since Pliny the younger recommended that plants growing on roofs would deflect lightning and thereby prevent fires. Perhaps because these small plants, also called houseleeks, were found growing on roofs, they must have a reason for being there? In reality they grew there because there is hardly a sunny spot where they won't grow.

The Latin name translates into 'forever alive' and it is a member of the Crassulaceae family, a genus of about 40 species that make good plants for rock gardens or any hot gritty place. *Sempervivums* won't flourish in deep shade or where water collects.

The pretty rosettes do bloom with branching cymes of star-shaped flowers in red, yellow, white or purple. The rosettes, the hens, die after flowering, but the chicks that surround them carry on -- and on. One species *S. arachnoideum* is also mat forming but the fleshy leaves are draped in fine webbing, a la a spider. It is appropriately called Cobweb houseleek. The cobweb is apt: there is no explanation for the houseleek term far as I know. The fat leaves were thought to be useful, like aloes, for treating burns and were considered salad fare, although one might prefer to wait until they appear in farmers markets before sampling them tossed in a salad.

Another low plant for the hot and dry and less fertile spots in your garden is the *Sedum*. It is also a member of the Crassulaceae family, but boasting 400 species of succulent annuals and evergreens, semi-evergreens, or deciduous biennials. The genus name is sometimes listed as *Hylotelephium* but surely the word *Sedum* is more user- friendly.

Sedums have a sap that may be irritating to some people, a clue that these species are not salad fare. Years ago everyone seemed to have clump forming and taller *S. 'Herbsfreude'* or '*Autumn Joy*' that had wide flat corymbs that began pink in late summer and darkened to copper. *S. acre*, Golden carpet or Golden moss will hug ground, sand, sidewalks and sport tiny yellow stars in summer. Another colorful *Sedum* is '*Ruby Glow*' that will stretch to ten inches in height but not wander more than a foot away.

If you would like a plant for a hanging basket designed to startle people, try *S. morganiatum*. Called Burro's Tail this plant is evergreen and must be brought in for the winter. The long slender 'tails' produce airy flowers of pink, scarlet, or purple. The succulent leaves that hug the stems are greenish-blue and about ¾ inch long. Hang it high to allow for the tails to eventually touch the ground.

On a cheery note:

The European Union has banned three neonicotinoids: - clothianidin, imidacloprid, and thiamethoxam in an attempt to protect bees essential to pollination. The companies making these pesticides have protested this action: Bayer and Syngenta claim the ban is unjustified. However that is a difficult claim to substantiate since recently 37 million bees died on a single Canadian farm. Scientists who examine dead bees can determine exactly which pesticides were involved in

their demise. Beekeepers contend that there are other chemicals that can be used that do not kill bees. Such interesting times we live in.

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