

Be Cool with Green!

You may have found that marauding rabbits and deer as well as blistering heat have reduced the color in your private landscape. As a result, green has emerged as a major color, not just a background shade like the blue of the sky.

The virtue of green is that it comes in dozens of different hues such as gray greens, olive greens, blue greens, lime greens, black greens. Green also has a way of magnifying the importance of texture as a factor in contrast. Red and orange of course make greens come alive but when the vivid flowers in those colors are in retreat, it is time to appreciate the foliage that mimics them. Smoke tree is one.

The native *Cotinus* is loved for its bronze foliage as well as for the 'smoke' created by the panicles of tiny flowers. 'Grace' a new *Cotinus* hybrid has more pink in the early foliage that matures to a gray green. On *Cotinus* the new foliage emerges over a long season offering contrast even before the leaves turn red/purple in fall.

A plant that stays green all year round is broom. *Cytisus* is a member of the pea family and the stems are covered in small yellow pea blooms in spring. One cultivar, 'Warminster' has pale butter yellow blooms and 'Madame butterfly' has flowers of vivid yellow marked in red. Brooms are salt tolerant so are good for a seaside garden. They also provide a textural contrast to large-leafed specimens as they appear to have no leaves at all.

Rich and deeply green is a border of yew (*Taxus*) or holly (*Ilex*) but without some relief the effect can become somber. Hollies come with variegated foliage to offer contrast as well as some with glossy 'spineless' leaves. One holly is most uncharacteristic by having long slender cascading leaves, *Ilex pedunculosa*, the longstalk holly. Surely this relaxed large shrub, small tree could reduce rigidity in a too formal planting.

Leaf shapes as well as colors offer contrast in a landscape. The native Eastern redbud, *Cercis canadensis*, loved for its heart-shaped leaves has been hybridized to provide not only flowers of true red and electric pink but leaves in a sharp citron yellow that does not darken to green. One Eastern redbud, 'Forest Pansy' has purple foliage and another, 'Merlot' has leaves that are purple, then burgundy, and mature to gray green. 'Merlot' was developed at NCSU.

The familiar hydrangeas are chosen for their colorful blooms but *H. quercifolia*, the oakleaf hydrangea is appreciated for the size and color of its autumn leaves. The flowers are spectacular in spring, white deepening to pink and then when the heat hits them a crisp brown. One oakleaf hydrangea, 'Little Honey' has chartreuse foliage and stays a small 3' by 3'.

Another way to provide contrast is to use grasses and ferns. Perhaps both are acquired tastes? Ferns are survivors. In a patch of rank clay-like dirt behind my house I planted one sensitive fern, *Onoclea sensibilis*, years ago and it now fills space where little else will grow. One colorful fern is *Osmunda claytoniana*, the interrupted fern. It makes a fine ground cover as it grows only 2 to 4 feet. The fronds appear white when they first unroll in spring, stay a bright green during summer and in fall are a soft gold. It is rugged and long-lived and thrives in dry soil.

A fern that prefers moist fertile soil is *Rumohra adiantiformis*, leatherleaf fern. Tall, to three feet, it needs shade, has wonderfully shiny fronds for bouquets and will tolerate warm winters. At home in acid soil are the *Athyrium* hybrid ferns. A. 'Ghost' has fronds that emerge silvery white before turning green, giving a sprightly lift to a shady spot. The *A. nipponicum* cultivars, Japanese painted ferns, add various colors to

otherwise staid plantings. They don't seem as indestructible as others and must be cultivated properly to really settle in.

As grasses have become more fashionable, the nurseries have provided more interesting cultivars. Gone are the industrial sized clumps that introduced real estate developments. They are often used now in swathes that reconcile large buildings to more informal surroundings. You can find them upright or weeping with blades of solid green, gray-green, blue or with blades in vertical or horizontal stripes of cream or gold. One small grass has a silver reverse.

Surprisingly, grasses make great companions for gladioli. The fine blades of the grass detract from the decline of the lower florets on the stems of the glads. Gaura, twirling butterflies, moves nicely among grasses and I have a very late aster that is a lovely blue on a plant with little else to recommend it that I think would be much prettier amid grasses than scattered to where it has migrated.