

## **Plant for the Climate!**

Some of us seem determined to do everything the hard way. Even in gardening we dream of growing those plants we loved in Seattle. This is probably a genetic trait and not a personality defect and can't be cured, but surely can be modified, don't you think? We live in Tidewater, Virginia. It is hot and humid during the prime growing season. Therefore, plant those species that love it hot and humid.

A second suggestion: don't turn your horticultural nose up at annuals just because they are cheap and easy and merely annuals. Actually, here a lot of perennials are annuals. We who live here know that when the temperature is close to ninety and the humidity matches it feels much hotter than a dry desert ninety-nine.

People cool by perspiring and stay miserable when the ambient air is too moisture laden to blot up any more water. Plants stay cool by transpiring water through their leaves and some plants manage to stay comfortable in hot, humid weather and some melt.

When selecting plants, for decades we consulted the hardiness charts that predicted which plants would survive the winters in which zones. That was wonderful and helpful but plants still died in our summer heat. In the late 1990s the Heat Zone Map arrived that tells us about the survival potential of plants in relation to heat.

Gardeners who have paid close attention to the behavior of their plants on 'dog days' tell us that a lot of plants begin to drag at 86 degrees and that same number applied to relative humidity means that for some plants, survival is a struggle. For one thing, diseases thrive at those numbers.

One table I saw gave the average number of days with temperatures above 86 degrees in Richmond and Norfolk. The average for Norfolk is between 45 and 90 days in an average summer. The average for Richmond, since it lacks cooling ocean breezes, is between 60 and 90 days. The average for humidity follows the same pattern. In July Norfolk's relative morning/evening humidity is 81/59; in August it is 84/62. For Richmond the figures morning/evening for July are 85/56 and August 89/57. There was no table given for June, our new July. Perhaps by reviewing those numbers it gives us grounds for our moaning and groaning?

The secret for a successful flower garden in Tidewater is in planting sturdy survivors. Two annuals that are country cousins love hot weather. *Impatiens balsamina* is one. Balsam is sweetly old-fashioned and has been upstaged in recent years by *Impatiens wallerana*, the ubiquitous 'color for shade' plant and *I. Hawkeri*, the New Guinea *impatiens*, said to like full sun. Well, perhaps it does, in Maine.

Balsam has the more interesting flowers but they hide close to the stem. This plant is perfect for cottage gardens and will self-sew where it is happy. *Vinca* – the plant, not the vine is another annual that will self-sew and will bloom in some shade as well as in full sun. It used to be called *Rosa vinca* but it is now *Catharanthus roseus*. It is also referred to as Madagascar

periwinkle, just to complicate a simple plant. You don't see it often but it is a cheerful addition at the feet of garden phlox as it shares the same palette.

If you want to know what to plant again, just look out your window and see where the color is. Your perennial coreopsis has been blooming steadily but if you want it to continue until autumn, you must go out some early morning and deadhead it. It will have spread itself generously among your other plants. It looks especially pretty in and around the white waving wands of gaura, another perennial that ignores the weather. Coneflower, the common Echinacea, appears and reappears over the years, surprisingly in new spots. The fancy new limey one I invested in last year, vanished over the winter. I think my soil automatically rejects 'fancy'. Another dependable bloomer is the other coneflower, Rudbeckia, aka black-eyed Susan. With common names like these it does help to have the botanical label in that slot in your head. Rudbeckia has to be disciplined to prevent its taking over the world but it is easily pulled out where it is a nuisance.

Currently out of fashion is Portulaca, the long blooming sedum-like plant that makes a fine ground cover for hot, dry, sunny spots with poor soil. It is also called purslane, which is not helpful since purslane is the name of a pesky weed. Happily it has another name, moss rose or rose moss. The delightful bright-colored flowers resemble tiny roses and come in a wide range of color from white to purple, even yellow. They are usually grown as annuals but there are a few perennials available in seed catalogs.