

## Getting Past Ordinary

Quick. Name the most boring annual in the world. Did I hear marigolds mentioned? Sorry. Petunias are today's topic.

An excellent way to elevate the image of a "commonplace" plant is demonstrated admirably by garden designer Luddene Perry at Cooks, a shop for food lovers. I showed you her design for the kitchen garden at Cooks a year ago. This summer at Cooks she dug up the strip of grass along the street and planted it with white petunias. In the center of each white rectangle, a dwarf 'Honey Crisp' apple tree rises up out of a sea of white petunias.

Bravo—and congratulations, Luddene. (She just sold her first book, a guide to organic produce.)



Vera Trent has a passion for pelargoniums. That's the Latin name for the kind of geraniums that are grown in pots as annuals. Like petunias, geraniums are overused (and not always to their best advantage). As a result they are widely dismissed as dull.

In the next issue Vera will tell us how she finds "specialty" geraniums and grows them from seed. She reveals her favorite sources of plants with gorgeous foliage and flowers, and scented geraniums with mesmerizing fragrance.

Also next time (because I ran out of space in this issue), you'll hear all about my latest crush: epimediums. This shade-loving plant tolerates dry soil conditions and is perfect for growing under trees like oaks. My epimediums share a crowded corner of with wild ginger, painted ferns, hostas, and other kindred spirits. The epimediums are by far the most well-mannered of the lot, always impeccable.

## PLANTS WE LOVE



### My Blue Heaven

Maybe it's because I have blue eyes, but long before I became a gardener, my favorite color was blue. Cobalt blue, robin's egg blue, sea or sky blue—it didn't matter, as long as the basic color was blue.

These days I make my living designing gardens for other people, and although my own tastes have expanded to other colors (at present I'm on a chartreuse and dark green kick), I'm often asked to include blues in the landscapes I design. Jack Foker's comments on red in the garden inspired me to walk through my yard, notebook in hand.

To my surprise, I discovered that my old subconscious affinity for blue has resulted in my having more than twenty plants with blue flowers, blue foliage, or a combination of the two. Granted, some of them tend more towards the lavender-blue end of the spectrum, but quite a few are "true blue." Here are some of my favorites.

Early bloomers include *Scilla siberica* (Siberian squill), which for me appears with early daffodils and *Mertensia virginica* (Virginia bluebells), both hardy to Zone 3 (*Scilla* will survive to Zone 2). I grow them under a huge beech tree in a bed of vinca that disguises their dying foliage, and over time they'll increase and spread—a wonderful bonus.

Then comes *Amsonia tabernaemontana*, the blue star flower, also hardy to Zone 3. Its flowers are a mixture of a very dark blue and lighter blue as they start to open, changing to sky blue completely. In the fall, this perennial's foliage turns a lovely golden yellow and



*Clematis eriostemon* (shrubby clematis) has nodding blue flowers.

lasts until frost. *Amsonia* blooms about the same time as *Iris siberica* 'Caesar's Brother,' a lush, velvet blue.

In the lavender-blue category is *Scabiosa columbaria* 'Butterfly Blue' (pincushion plant; Zone 3), which has the added advantage of an incredibly long bloom time if you deadhead it periodically. (It looks great with white campanulas.) Here in my garden it begins to bloom towards the end of the flowering season.

For an absolutely spectacular little groundcover, plant *Veronica spicata* 'Waterperry Blue' (Zone 3). Mine started as three four-inch pots in my side yard five years ago and has since provided enough rooted pieces to edge a substantial portion of my forty-foot-long sunny perennial border. 'Waterperry' produces dozens of light blue flowers, but reaches only four to six inches tall. It would be great in open rocky areas too.

If you have a shady spot, you could try *Iris cristata* (crested iris; Zone 3), which also spreads where it's happy and in spring bears

My favorite blues are found in the clematises I grow, both herbaceous and large-flowered varieties.

pale blue flowers with a yellow crest.

More blue-gray than pure blue are some of the smaller ornamental fescue

grasses, like *Festuca glauca* 'Elijah Blue' (Zone 4), whose steely color and fine texture contrast well with plants like *Iris pallada* 'Variegata' and ornamental alliums (which are often more on the lavender end of the spectrum).

I grow a few clumps of this grass near an obelisk housing one of my favorite blue clematises; the foliage softens the hard metal lines of the structure and provides a welcome contrast with the broader shape of the clematis flowers. The classic blue *Hosta* 'Halcyon' serves the same function, and when grown in semi-shade its leaves can look almost pure silver-blue.

My all-time favorite blues are found in the clematises I grow, both herbaceous and large-flowered hybrids, including 'General Sikorski', *C. integrifolia* 'Hendersonii', 'Arabella', and 'H.F. Young'. All, to my eye, are astonishingly beautiful.

The shrubby varieties have the added advantage of an extended bloom period; if



you plant them in a mixed border they will scramble among neighboring plants, or you can support them with peony hoops or the odd forked branch that fell out of a tree.

Alas, I don't have room here to mention all the blues I love (hydrangeas, spiderworts, salvias, campanulas, English bluebells, columbines), but I hope I've persuaded you that every garden needs a splash of blue.

—Melissa Clark

## Foker's Blues

When I told Jack Foker that his article on red flowers had inspired Melissa Clark to sing the praises of blue, Jack asked if he could add his two cents. What's interesting is their lists don't overlap at all. There are a lot more blues out there than I thought.

Why sad people are said to have the blues is beyond me. To my eye (and heart), blue is the most luminous of colors. Unlike a true red, blue does occur in nature, though usually tinged with purple. Wild penstemons are one example. For a bluer blue, in August look for the closed and fringed gentians in relatively moist, open areas of the northern prairie.

'Heavenly Blue' morning glories head my list of garden blues. You could not ask for a kinder, gentler blue.

Delphiniums are another good source of rich blues. In the tall Pacific series, try the Camelot varieties 'Blue Jay' and 'Blue Bird'. The shorter Magic Fountain varieties also boast some nice, unnamed blues, as do the dwarf Mediterranean Seas and Crystal mixes. 'Blue Mirror' defines the cut-leaf dwarf type.

Blue batchelor buttons (cornflowers) self seed and repeat bloom. Of the blue lobelias, try 'Cascade Blue' for hanging baskets, 'Blue Moon' and 'Crystal Blue' if you need a compact plant, 'Great Blue' if you need something tall.

The blue-eyed grass 'Lucerne', 'Johnson's Blue' hardy geranium, the groundcover *Ceratostigma plumbago*, and 'Heavenly Blue' flax also add true-blue voices to the uplifting chorus.

—Jack Foker

Why sad people  
are said to have  
the blues is  
beyond me.

## Foliage Footnote

A red leaf can be anything from scarlet, deep crimson, or magenta to purple, copper, or brown. Writing in a summer issue of *The Connecticut Gardener*, garden designer Pamela Weil raves about smoke bush, purple-leaved sand cherry, and Japanese maples (especially the named varieties 'Bloodgood' and 'Moonfire'). Perennials she likes include *Heucherella* x 'Burnished Bronze', *Ligularia* 'Britt Marie Crawford', and *Penstemon* 'Husker's Red', as well as the red-leaved heucheras (coral bells) 'Plum Pudding', 'Chocolate Ruffles', 'Montrose Ruby', and 'Velvet Night'.

I decided to put 'Chocolate Ruffles' to work in my garden. The trouble spot was a flower bed below a sick wisteria vine that is supposed to shelter a rusty, cast-iron nymph. The bed had never filled in properly, partly because I'd planted tall, spindly Casablana lilies when short, mounding plants are really called for. The wisteria's near demise made matters worse. Overzealous pruning last fall had left too many branches with too few leaves. So this summer, instead of thick green leaves and pendulous purple flowers, I have thick, gray, leafless (and lifeless but still twining) branches—which is not unattractive actually, especially when the purple-flowered clematis vine that grows up the other side of the arch is in bloom. A clematis I've yet to identify climbs a rusty metal trellis directly behind the nymph. It has small, ruffled, chalky pink flowers that look like they belong on a wedding cake.

The flower bed is supposed to anchor all this verticality. It was a hopeless jumble of mismatched plants until I replaced the lilies with masses of 'Chocolate Ruffles'. They are the perfect shape and size, they send up sprays of tiny white flowers, and their copper-colored leaves repeat the rusty colors of the metal arch and trellis, as well as the cast-iron nymph, which was imported from England and is the only "serious" ornament in my garden. White impatiens and white begonias with bronze leaves fill in between the coral bells in the semi-shady space behind the nymph; in front are red dianthus, orange marigolds, and white mums, with blue campanulas edging the border.

—B.B.

## Variegata

As my garden matures, I must face the fact that new ideas are continually entering my repertoire, uninvited perhaps but welcome. For example, I never used variegated foliage in my garden in the States. When we moved to England it was given no assignment here at the Old Rectory either, with the exception of two *Cornus controversa variegata* shrubs placed in the corners of yew-enclosed beds.

After four years the shrubs look just as I'd visualized them. Layered, creamy white clouds above the dark green yew, they draw one's eye out into the garden, arousing an urge to discover what lies beyond. We call this area the glade. The dogwoods blend into the larger scheme, joining forces with other small trees and shrubs to create a distinctly woodland feel. It is unlike any other part of the garden.

Buoyed by this success, I chose *Acer platanoides Drummondii* to anchor a new bed to one side of the glade. This lovely maple's white-margined leaves echo the colors of the dogwoods, and at the same time soften an overwhelmingly dense mass of green laurel in the background. Once again, a variegated plant performed just as I'd hoped.

Variegation has been elevated in status; its use is now fully conscious. A creamy-edged *Philadelphus* (mock orange) adds subtlety and texture to the blue and yellow border. *Rhamnus Alaternus Variegata* lights up the corners, bringing out the best in its neighbors.

But I've saved the best for last. My favorite by far is the remarkable *Pittospeum tenuifolium* 'Irene Patterson'. To my mind this is the ultimate in variegated plants. I discovered it while strolling through a London square.

Slow-growing and rather tender, 'Irene Patterson' has small ripple-edged leaves that are marbled green and white in the most beguiling way. It keeps its leaves all winter, and thus has earned a place in three areas of the garden. A superb backdrop for boxwood, I have used it behind a

Variegated  
dogwoods  
draw one's eye  
out into the  
garden.

continued on page 8