

# THE GARDEN IN AUTUMN

by Frank Greer

*TWG Editor:* This marvelous article was supposed to be printed in last winter's edition, but space didn't permit at the time. Please keep in mind as you read it that it's the thought, not the date, that counts. It's more interesting this way, anyway.

It was a glorious fall for a gardener in Wisconsin. Unlike the previous El Niño year, the oaks lost all of their leaves by Halloween. With the exception of a violent wind and rain storm on the 10th of November, during which I lost a massive white oak, there was no inclement weather to complain about. At least I got 5 cubic yards of "free" wood chips from my arboreal loss! And the wind damage to white pines in the neighborhood plus a Fraser fir which was downed in the University of Wisconsin Arboretum, made available an abundance of free evergreen boughs as a protective cover for the winter sure to come.

My clumps of *Miscanthus gracillimus*, somewhat out of place in my woodland garden, bloomed for the first time in five years and I enjoyed their pinkish spikes. Even the *Hakonechloa macra* (the taller, green form of the more popular *H. Aureola*) put out inflorescences, though those darn rabbits reduced the size of several of the largest clumps with their dietary indiscretions. I had been so looking forward to their dances throughout the winter months. Why did those rodents have to decimate the *corps de ballet*? Unlike the *Miscanthus* which goes "splat" with the first ice or snow storm (when grown in shade), *Hakonechloa* maintains its elegant form until cut back time in April. A disap-

pointment for the growing season was my inability to get the five additional plants ordered from *Mileager's* Nursery during their catalog frenzy. Every single bud on the *Aconitum carmichaelii* displayed its rich bluish-purple before the first killing frost, and only the flowering *Cimicifuga simplex* 'White Pearl' was cut short by the frost in early November.

Perhaps the highlight of the season occurred Saturday, October 24, when I pulled into the driveway on a warm, sunny afternoon. Thanks to the perfect weather conditions, hundreds of *Crocus speciosus* were in full glorious bloom throughout the garden in an unequalled

your efforts comes in October, rather than in some indeterminate number of weeks after the spring equinox. Unlike other fall crocuses I have tried (and I've tried many), these persist and multiply in our damp and warm summer climate. I pulled in several passersby from the front walk to enjoy the show, but most couldn't understand why these typical appearing "spring beauties" had their seasons mixed up.

A second, very rewarding event occurred a few days later when the late morning sun illuminated the autumn foliage of the climbing hydrangea (*Hydrangea anomala* ssp. *petiolaris*) outside the bedroom window. Its rich textured leaves of mottled green and gold fluttering in the dazzling sunshine made an unforgettable display, though it lasted for only a few minutes. The vine has climbed thirty feet up the sides of the massive white oak tree in the last ten years, and I have read that it can climb as high as 80 feet! In 2008, will it be 60 feet tall? I can hardly wait.



*Helleborus foetidus*

display. The surrealistic beauty of these late October blossoms—pale lavender with streaks of white pointing to the reddish orange anthers—literally brought tears to my eyes. Unlike other bulbs, this crocus gives sort of an instant bulb gratification. You can plant a hundred new bulbs in late August, and the reward for

I had as many plants in bloom in the garden on the second of November as in the previous autumn. *Corydalis lutea* had completely rejuvenated itself and was throwing up flowers as if it were mid-July (talk about a frost tolerant plant!), and even *Corydalis ochroleuca* had white blossoms in evidence. Though long past peak, there were still white and pink blossoms of *Begonia grandis* (hardy begonia) and *Cimicifuga simplex* 'White Pearl' was in its prime. Tom Cottingham's long blooming white phlox (the one he calls 'Great Aunt Caroline') was still performing, but to be

honest, I have never seen so much mildew on the foliage of this “mildew resistant” variety.

*Tricyrtis formosana* was at the height of bloom and *T. x* ‘Togen’ was still performing well along with a few remaining flowers on *T. x* ‘Angel’s Halo’ and *T. formosana* ‘Amethystina’. *Aster anomalus* (a shade-tolerant aster native to Illinois and Kansas woodlands) was still gorgeous in purple and gold, and the variegated hawkweed [*Hieracium maculatum*] was still throwing up its stars of yellow. There were also a few flowers on *Lamium maculatum* ‘Album’ and *Impatiens balfourii* was flowering along the edges of the paths. One of the star performers was the hybrid *Hellebore* ‘Windsor Strain’, which produced a lovely display of red-mahogany blossoms for the third autumn in a row. (And it produces more flowers in the spring as well.)

On Thanksgiving Day, a glorious warm sunny day, two frail blossoms of *Crocus speciosus* were all that remained of these harbingers of spring, but the hellebore was still gorgeous. *Hellebore foetidus* had thrown up a large bright green stalk with a half dozen lateral branches each with a cluster of immature flower buds. I couldn’t help but wonder if these would survive intact until March—better protect it with a covering of white pine boughs.

For the benefit of Nancy Nedvik (owner of *The Flower Factory* nursery), who has publicly announced her dislike of the flowers of *Phlox paniculata* ‘Norah Leigh’, a few pale pink flowers were in evidence in the withering umbels. Not my favorite phlox either, I must confess, but I’ll take anything on November 26, including the remaining battered blossoms of *Corydalis lutea*! In the woodland garden, the six rounded forms of *Tsuga canadensis* ‘Gentsch White’ were in their frosted glory, and I was so moved by the foliage

of the epimediums on this day, lit by the low, diffused rays of light from the early winter sunshine, that I raced inside to grab my camera.

If you don’t have large borders of epimedium (especially the evergreen ones) in your woodland garden, you are missing out on one of the finest of all garden plants that is good for all four seasons. There is no other perennial in our climate that can add as much to the woodland garden scene at the end of November. The oval shaped border of *E. pinnatum ssp. colchicum* with its large dark green shiny leaves was truly magnificent in the autumn light, contrasting beautifully with the back drop of ‘Gentsch White’ hemlocks. *Epimedium x rubrum*, in contrast, was a mass of reddish purple, further highlighted by the yellow-pink tinged foliage of *E. grandiflora* displayed nearby. The true beauty of the long border of *E. x versicolor* ‘Sulphureum’ with its deep green leaves mottled with a dusky purple could not be totally captured on film.

I was delighted to discover that the new plant of *Epimedium grandiflorum* ‘Crimson Glory’ was named for its fall color, not its flowers. Of all the epimediums in the garden, this one had the brightest colored foliage, a very showy pinkish red. I dream of a large display of this variety! Epimedium aficionados, by the way, are talking about the late fall and early spring leaf color of the new cultivar, *Epimedium* ‘Black Sea’, whose shiny leaves are reportedly nearly black at the extremes of the seasons—something to look forward to next November.

Other perennials of note on Thanksgiving Day for their fall color were *Heuchera americana* ‘Chocolate Ruffles’ and *Plantago major* ‘Rubrifolia’. Yes, I know that plantago is a variant of a common weed (plantain), but this “treasure” was the result of my long trek up into the mountains to *Sandy Herb Mush Nursery* [Leicester, NC] this summer. The foliage

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at this time of year is a gorgeous, deep red! For the record, I also love *Plantago major* ‘Variegata’ which I purchased from Joanna Reed (who gardens near Philadelphia) many years ago. This plant proves that a weed is a weed only in the eyes of the beholder, as my wife is continuously pulling out the luscious tiny variegated seedlings from between the bricks in the front walk.

And finally, just because you were wondering, on November 21, at 2:12 p.m. I planted the last of 1,483 bulbs.



**Frank Greer, M.D.** is president of the Wisconsin Hardy Plant Society, which (according to Frank) is “for people with broad interests rather than those who are nuts over just one genus.” In his spare time, Dr. Greer is a professor of pediatric medicine. He is also best friends with Ed Hasselkus. Greer lives in Madison, WI. He can be reached at (608) 233-4686.

Individuals can join the Wisconsin Hardy Plant Society for \$8 by writing to Richard Bloomquist, 5743 Wilshire Drive, Madison, WI 53711. Good deal!