

Color? It's a Garden's Harmony, not its Melody

by Rosalind Reed

Too often, gardeners focus on flower color as the key element in their plant selection criteria, but in practical terms, that may well be color's least effective use. Because the flowers of most trees, shrubs and perennials bloom for about a minute here in Chicago, it is actually the foliage, stems, and seedhead's year-round impact in the garden that predominates and should be a gardener's primary consideration in design. Indeed, the challenge of relying on color as a design tool grows exponentially when we decide to execute ever-changing combinations of flowers throughout the year. Even Gertrude Jekyll, the doyenne of color in the garden, said that in beautiful England, color borders will be suitable for viewing for only a month or so at a time. After that, presumably, one spends the next month in a different part of the garden. Lucky Gertrude. (And, she had a full-time gardening staff!)

Once I realized that I was staff-less, England-less, and estate-less, I began to think about color differently, and I stopped focusing on the color of flowers. Now, my thoughts tend to go from the dominant landscape features, then to fall and winter interest, then foliage color, and, last, the flowers. I try to let the color ideas move like an undercurrent through the design process. As the design ideas take shape, color then becomes a tool to emphasize design goals.

The first big color decision is to ask what is dominant and permanent in the landscape. The red brick house? The 50 year old stand of beautiful blue spruce? The pink granite boulder

retaining wall? So I start with what's dominant and make initial color decisions through the prism of what colors will enhance, compliment or contrast with the dominant feature(s). This is the time to think about the color wheel and theories of color contrast and harmony. You can't get into too much trouble, color-wise, if you always remember that each of the three primary colors (red, yellow, blue) has an opposite secondary color (green, purple, orange). We see these primary/secondary combinations especially pungently. Each person determines their own pungency quotient, but the basic principles always apply.

So a red brick house might be enhanced by its opposite, deep green yews. Or, a cream-colored stucco house might be spectacular with the plant world's equivalent of a Hugo car, (i.e., cheap, short-lived, and easy to replace) a purple leaf plum (*Prunus cistena*). The pink granite boulder



wall might actually become a thing of beauty when planted with blue-green and silver foliaged plants, which will bring out the orange tones in the boulders.

Unfortunately, sometimes we have an existing, immutable color war to mediate, particularly when it comes to constructed features such as fences, patios, and driveways. Think of a neighbor's fence, painted in "basic hardware store brown", and how poorly it looks next to your red brick house. When permanent structures are engaged in a color war, I start my assessment by determining whether cool colors or a warm palette will be the best mediator. These color selections for new hardscaping or plant material are especially important in the winter landscape, when permanent features are most dominant. Will the cool tints of a blue-stone patio or the warmer tans of flagstone be more effective, or will a blue spruce or a white pine be the best foil?

As to plant material, my selections, from trees to groundcovers, pass through the filter of foliage color. Contrast in foliage color adds to the illusion that something is happening in the garden, even when there are no flowers. When planning a landscape which will have turf, it is especially important to add foliage color, since there are so many plants whose leaves are the same color as turf. I use a lot of cool-colored foliage, including gray, silver, blue, and blue-green, which add contrast and can double as pastel shades. Chartreuse, gold, red, purple and dark green foliage provides a bolder color palette. I rely on repeating foliage colors to unify a garden.

The quality of light also affects the pungency of color combinations. When I visit the Rockies in the summer, I always fall in love with how the colors of petunias (as well as almost

every other flower) glow in the high mountain air. Here in Chicago, those same petunias can look washed out under our flat, nearly sea level Midwest sky. A blue and silver garden can also look very flat on a hot cloudless day. To counteract this situation, in sunny sites, I try to back light plants with semi-transparent leaves, such as canna lilies, Japanese maples, and most ornamental grasses. In strong sunlight, different colored foliage is often more effective than flower color to create interest.

In shady situations, some plants with shiny leaves, such as pachysandra, lirope, ligularia 'Desdemona', and some hostas, reflect light better than others. I try to take advantage of contrast between strong sparkle versus matte leaf characteristics, especially when suitable plant material for a tough location may only come in basic green. Since a majority of shade-tolerant plants flower early in the year, contrast in foliage color is often the only tool to use for interest from July on.

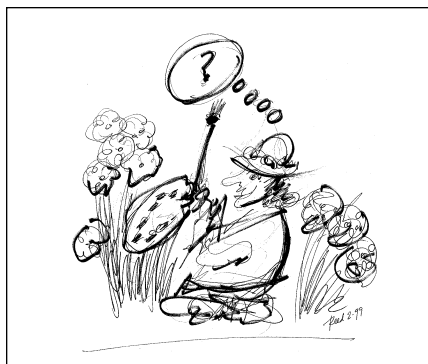
When I set the basic color scheme, it's time for my Gertrude Jekyll act. I used to think that it would help if I had a collection of books on color in the garden. The most important thing I have learned from my mispent investment is not to buy any book that includes the letter "u" in the word, color. Apt advice for an English border may not be very applicable here in Chicago. Trial and error has also taught me that plants in Chicago follow their own pre-determined color chart, and the most successful gardens are those which go with the flow, color-wise.

In the spring, all flowers—no matter their color—look bold, as there is

nothing else going on. It is far more important to site spring-blooming plants in the landscape so they don't look spotty or insignificant than it is to worry about bloom color. I like to plant bulbs timed to bloom with trees and shrubs so the color impact is magnified.

As the season progresses to late spring and early summer, almost everything that blooms is pastel colored, or compliments the pastel palette. To me, these tints look fresh and wonderful when accompanied by the many shades of emerging green foliage. The exception to the pastel palette are those darn 'Stella de Oro' daylilies, which scream out "taxicab yellow!" starting in mid-June.

By mid-summer, there is a greater choice of plant material in stronger, more saturated colors, as well as pastel tints. One can have a 'riot-o-color' scheme, which looks like a street fight in which pastel and bold colors clash and vie for dominance. Annuals are usually the villain in this street fight, and the ring leader is usu-



ally the bed of impatiens which, too often, are sweet pink when they should be orange. In mid-summer, I especially enjoy how the foliage of ornamental grasses captures the stark flat light on a hot sunny day, yet can

reflect a different spectrum of light when the day is overcast.

As summer ends, both foliage and flower colors become bolder and bolder, and the 'Stella de Oro' daylilies, if they have re-bloomed on time, nicely compliment the black-eyed susans, which somehow don't look out of place at all. In the fall, almost all colors look good, as even pastel pink seems deeper in the fall light. I count on changing foliage colors as an important part of the total color plan, and I prefer to select plants that have strong fall interest.

To aid in continuity through the seasons, I try to select plant material with similar hues. For example, I might use a continuum of deep rosy red flowers from the tulip 'Coeur Cardinal' to unnamed crimson peony to rose 'Othello' to monarda 'Gardenview Scarlet' (and when the latter gets mildew, it adds to the silver foliage palette!) When by some lucky coincidence plant material blooms and overlaps, the garden maintains its integrity. In my planning, some of the summer flowering workhorses are Asiatic lilies and daylilies, which one can find in a tint to suit any plan. When the blooms compliment the foliage colors, the whole garden seems more integrated and alive. Color takes its rightful place as the undercurrent in a successful garden design.



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