

Way to Grow

Fantastic Foliage for Adding Color, Contrast and Flare to Your Garden

by Steve & Cathy Lambert



Sometimes we, as gardeners, get fixated on adding flowering plants to bring color into our yard. Most shrubs and perennials typically flower for only three to six weeks. Sure there are some exceptions to this, but flowers are fleeting while foliage is not.

With the proper selection and placement plants, colorful foliage can increase interest and contrast in your landscape year-round. Combining plants with purple leaves, gold and chartreuse foliage, variegation of color, and even black or grey leaves can provide so many great eye-catching possibilities. As landscape designers, we have learned that the most interesting gardens are those based on form and foliage – not just on flowers. Flowers should be considered as icing on the cake, not the cake itself.

Many people believe that green is the backdrop for the garden. While green is calming and soothing to the eye, it can be boring without adding some contrasting colors to create bold accents.

One of our favorite vibrant combinations is mixing purple foliage with plants that have chartreuse or gold leaves. The visual contrast of the dark purple and bright gold will make your garden sizzle! For example, use dark purple “Cherry Bomb” Japanese Barberry under planted with the unique grey/chartreuse Stachys “Primrose Herron” or Lambs Ears, or Weigelia “Wine and Roses” next to Spirea “Neon lights.” These combinations also work well on a small scale in pots. Try planting “Helmunds Pillar” Japanese Barberry, which has dark purple leaves and a natural columnar shape, with “Golden Crinkle leaf Oregano.” Reverse this stand out color combo by planting “Sun Pillar” Japanese Barberry (which has the same growth habit of “Helmunds Pillar” but with bright gold leaves) near any of the fabulous purple leaf Coral Bells.

Other exciting plant groupings include silver leafed plants accented by maroon or dark green foliage. The new *Pennisetum setaceum* “Fireworks” fountain grass with its bursts of maroon, plum and pink, will add some “ohhhh” and “ahhhh” to any

spot in your yard especially when planted with “Silver Falls” *Dicentra* for an intriguing opposition of both color and growth direction. The dramatic difference of the many red hues on the upward reaching, strap shaped leaves against the dime sized, silver, downward trailing ones is striking. *Pseudocarpus* or “Nine barks” is part of a family of shrubs that hybridizers have been spending a lot of time working on recently. The first of these hybrids we began using was the appropriately named “Diablo.” It provides plenty of contrast on its own with deep green and burgundy leaves, unique bright red stems and round clusters of small, bright white flowers with a burst of gold in their center. It is, however, very large and can grow six to eight feet in height and width. Plant breeders have now introduced several dwarf varieties. One such dwarf *Pseudocarpus* is “summer wine.” It has the same characteristics as “Diablo”

but tops out at four to five feet. Another newer dwarf variety is “Coppertina,” which has a unique orange, copper glow to its new growth.

Variegated shrubs and perennials have brightly contrasting colors in and of themselves, and many of them add foliage color and contrast all year long without being in bloom. For example, the variegated foliage of “President Roosevelt” *Rhododendron* has striking dark green foliage with a wide yellow spray running through its center. It’s an excellent choice to brighten up a dark corner. Variegated Japanese Forest grass makes an excellent foreground plant that adds movement and magic anywhere it’s planted. Other variegated plants that do well in Orinda are creek, shrub or colored twig dogwoods. Our favorite is *Cornus spaethii*, with its dark salmon/red twigs and bright green and yellow leaves that stay on the shrub until Christmas time when they turn a translucent pink. The “Holy Grail” of variegated shrubs is *Cornus alternifolia* “Golden Shadows.” This plant glows in the sun or shade and has a unique growing pattern of horizontal branches which has earned it the common name of “The Pagoda Dogwood.” Traditionally rare to find, these are now more readily available and make an unbelievable specimen plant.

Native and drought tolerant plants often



Colorful foliage brings long-lasting variation to your garden.

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grow foliage that's light grey to white, sometimes with fuzzy leaves to reflect the bright sunlight. Most of these require some shade in our inland climate. Since the lighter color denotes an absence of chlorophyll, they can burn in very hot sun where humidity is low. These light-leaved plants provide an excellent foil for bright or dark green foliage. The *Teucrium* family of plants (Germander) grows into a soft grey shrub that blooms with sky blue flowers in the middle of the winter.

Phormiums, commonly known as New Zealand Flax, come in a wonderful rainbow of colors. Their sword-shaped leaves are a delightful contrast to the mounding form of most other plants. Plant the very upright *Phormium* "Guardman," with its striking combination of olive green, maroon and bright pink stripes, in a sunny spot where you want to add a dramatic pop. *Phormiums* can burn out their prettiest colors if overexposed to intense heat, so a spot with morning to midday sun is preferred.

Many ornamental grasses like the *Miscanthus* or *Carex* come with colored stripes, bands or spots and are flush with contrasting blues, reds, oranges, yellows, pinks or purples. Use these colorful plants for their vertical accent in your landscape and for the seductive wave of motion they add in a breeze. A group of grasses that are more palm-like in appearance is "Cordilines." In the past, these plants grew quite tall atop a narrow trunk. More recent introductions have no trunk and an ultimate plant height of around three to four feet. Our favorite is Cordaline "Festival grass," which is a dark maroon and has sweeping one inch wide, strap shaped leaves. These are amazing when planted where you can look up at them so the sunlight illuminates their leaves. Another favorite grass for a stunning contrast when combined with bright chartreuse, red or coral is "Black Mondo" grass, *Ophiopogon nigresens*. This thin-bladed, small, mound grass is without a doubt black, grows three to six inches tall and adds amazing drama when planted near light colored rocks or under pale or bright green shrubs.

Many subtropical plants that do well in Orinda also boast unbelievable color and contrast in their foliage. The large leaves of the Canna Lily come in a wide range of colors and sizes. A truly unique Canna is "Stuttgart," which has a fun, wavy edged, deep green leaf with pure white strips of varying widths.

As with any mixed bed or border, be sure

to take into account the expected growth dimensions of all plants to prevent overcrowding. Taller plants should go in the back, or middle of your border, while smaller plants can be tucked around the front and edges.

There are many more fantastic foliage plants to choose from, some with colorful flowers as a bonus. Just remember, whether your garden is in full bloom or not, you can add flare with foliage to keep it looking lovely and lively all year round!

If you have any questions, email us at Office@GardenLightsLandscape.com.