

FOLIAGE FIESTA OF COLORS

BY STEPHANIE COHEN

I ALWAYS ASK MY AUDIENCES HOW LONG THE AVERAGE PERENNIAL PLANT FLOWERS (NOTE THE WORD “AVERAGE”). IF YOU GUESSED THREE WEEKS, YOU’D BE RIGHT. SO INSTEAD OF WRITING ABOUT NEW PLANTS AND GOING INTO ECSTASY ABOUT FLOWERS, IN THIS ARTICLE I’M CONCENTRATING ON NEW PLANTS WHOSE FOLIAGE DELIVERS FOR THREE SEASONS AND GIVES YOU FLOWERS AS AN ADDED BONUS.

Flowers are wonderful, but what do we mostly look at from spring to fall? Foliage! But don’t think just green. There are all kinds of colors to choose from. Yellow is sunny, cheerful and perks up a drab, shady garden. Orange and peachy colors pop out at you and definitely make you think of fall. Reds are sexy, provocative and definitely evoke interesting responses. Purples are elegant, royal and regal. It connects us with our spiritual nature. Bronzes add warmth and comfort. Shades of green are cool, soothing and soft.

Foliar Marvels

Hostas have never been high on my plant lust list, but check out hosta ‘Stitch in Time’ (Zones 3-8). This gorgeous 12-in. hosta has broad golden leaves with dark green patterns in the center that looks like a stitched conifer. The “stitches” elongate as the plant grows. This sport of ‘Summer Breeze’ takes part-shade and some early morning sun if you have moist soil.

Here’s a native plant that just jumped a notch—*Lobelia cardinalis* ‘Golden Torch’ (Zones 3-9), also called Cardinal Flower. *L. cardinalis* is very hardy, attracts hummingbirds and



Euphorbia ‘Shorty’

now sports golden foliage until late summer when the scarlet flowers appear. Put on your sunglasses! This is a plant for a moist, shaded site, particularly in the South. It’s 22 in. tall and is definitely noticeable in borders or in naturalized situations.

Hakonechloa macra ‘All Gold’ (Zones 6-9) lights up shady areas. This grass is slow-growing, so advise your customers to buy at least three. It’s great for the shade border, but equally at home in containers. It needs a moisture-retentive soil. If this isn’t your cup of tea, try ‘Stripe It Rich,’ a somewhat subtler combo of white stripes with the yellow.

I’ve begun to like the *Heuchera x villosa* hybrids better than other heuchera hybrids. I have some older favorites like ‘Chocolate Ruffles,’ ‘Obsidian’ and Mahogany.’ *Villosa* varieties like ‘Mocha,’ ‘Brownies’ and ‘Beaujolais’ are stupendous. My other favorites are ‘Caramel,’ ‘Citronelle’ and ‘Pistache’ – colors range from caramel to chartreuse and yellow green, and they grow in Zones 4-9. Most of these mentioned range from 12-24 in. tall. I just love them in the garden, where they make an exciting tapestry of groundcovers, add color to the border and give you some drop-dead color in containers. Combine them with some of the great new coleus colors, other tropicals, or add *Euphorbia* Diamond Frost for foliage contrast all summer long.



Hakonechloa 'All Gold'

Terra Nova Nurseries



Lobelia cardinalis 'Golden Torch'

Terra Nova Nurseries



Hosta 'Stitch In Time'

Hans Hansen, Shady Oaks Nursery



Heuchera 'Mahogany'

Terra Nova Nurseries

I haven't forgotten silver. *Brunnera macrophylla* 'King's Ransom' (Zones 5-9) is an appealing foliage delight with a superior blend of both silver and gold. The mounding 5-in. leaves of muted green overlaid with silver are edged in bright yellow in spring, maturing to cream and remaining right until frost. In early spring it's covered with small blue blooms that may remind you of Forget-Me-Nots; its common name is False-Forget-Me-Not. At 15-18 in. tall, the foliage is a magnificent sight in the shade border. Drought-tolerant and unappetizing to deer, it can be planted in open woodland gardens. But it's so showy, it belongs front and center in shade displays.

When it comes to silver, never forget *Athyrium nipponicum pictum*, the Japanese Painted Fern. If you still haven't tried 'Burgundy Lace' (Zones 4-9), it's 14-24 in. tall and the lacy fronds are a metallic burgundy and silver color. These shade lovers need cool roots and time to mature to show their intense color. All of the other cultivars that have some red in them, such as 'Ursula's Red,' are equally stunning, but this one stands out. This variety needs good garden loam and a moisture-retentive soil. Plant it with a white-edged hosta for some interesting effects.

I need to mention *Schizachyrium scoparium* 'Blue Heaven,' better known as little bluestem. This grass is 3 ft. tall, which is not exactly

little. It's light blue in spring, turns pink and burgundy hues in late summer, and matures to copper tips. This very hardy (Zones 3-9) grass loves heat, adapts to most soils and flourishes with benign neglect—so don't bother overwatering or overfertilizing.

I want to mention two euphorbias commonly called spurges. *Euphorbia* 'Shorty,' which I had the pleasure of introducing as a new plant for the Perennial Plant Association, has blue-green leaves on a nicely compact plant. As summer turns to frost, its color intensifies. In spring, bright yellow flowers are a great contrast. It's listed as Zone 7, but I'm growing it in Zone 6. I guess the plant forgot to read the catalog. *Euphorbia x martinii* 'Cherokee' has foliage that starts out dark purple in spring. In summer it turns green, with just the tips remaining purple. By frost, it turns sort of bronzy. It's 15 in. tall, has the same yellow flowers and is hardy to Zone 6. Full sun and good drainage keep most euphorbias happy.

So keep reminding your customers that leaves can be quite luscious when blossoms are in short supply. You don't always need flowers to have a colorful garden when you have so many tantalizing foliage colors to choose from. **GP**



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Terra Nova Nurseries Inc.

Agastache 'Summer Glow' blooms all summer with glowing, pale yellow flowers with dark calyxes to extend the showy season. This herbaceous perennial has a narrow upright habit with bright green foliage, is easy to grow with good drainage and is popular with hummingbirds.

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Whittier Wood Products

GardenWood Furniture's 500KFBA Nesting Arm Chair is made from yellow balau hardwood with a rich nutmeg finish. The Nesting Chair features a comfortable, ergonomic design and can stack together for easy storage. All hardware is anodized for weather resistance.

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