

Year-round colour in the garden

Given a bit of planning, you can select plants that will help provide a progression of colour and interest right through the floriferous months of spring and summer and on into autumn and winter

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When people say "...oh and of course my garden must have colour all year round" what do they really mean? Could it be a continual blaze of show-stopping colour or maybe a gentle progression of soft pastel shades? Colour theory alone is an enormous subject and could easily fill an entire series. In this article I focus on how to analyse your own garden and plan for a better spread of colour throughout the year, extending the seasonal interest.

Think green

First we need to appreciate that green is a colour; so many people ignore this important fact. Remember the stunning garden that Tom Stuart-Smith designed for Laurent-Perrier at the Chelsea Flower Show in 2008? It was predominantly green with a delicate touch of white, deservedly winning a gold medal and best in show, thus demonstrating the power of green.

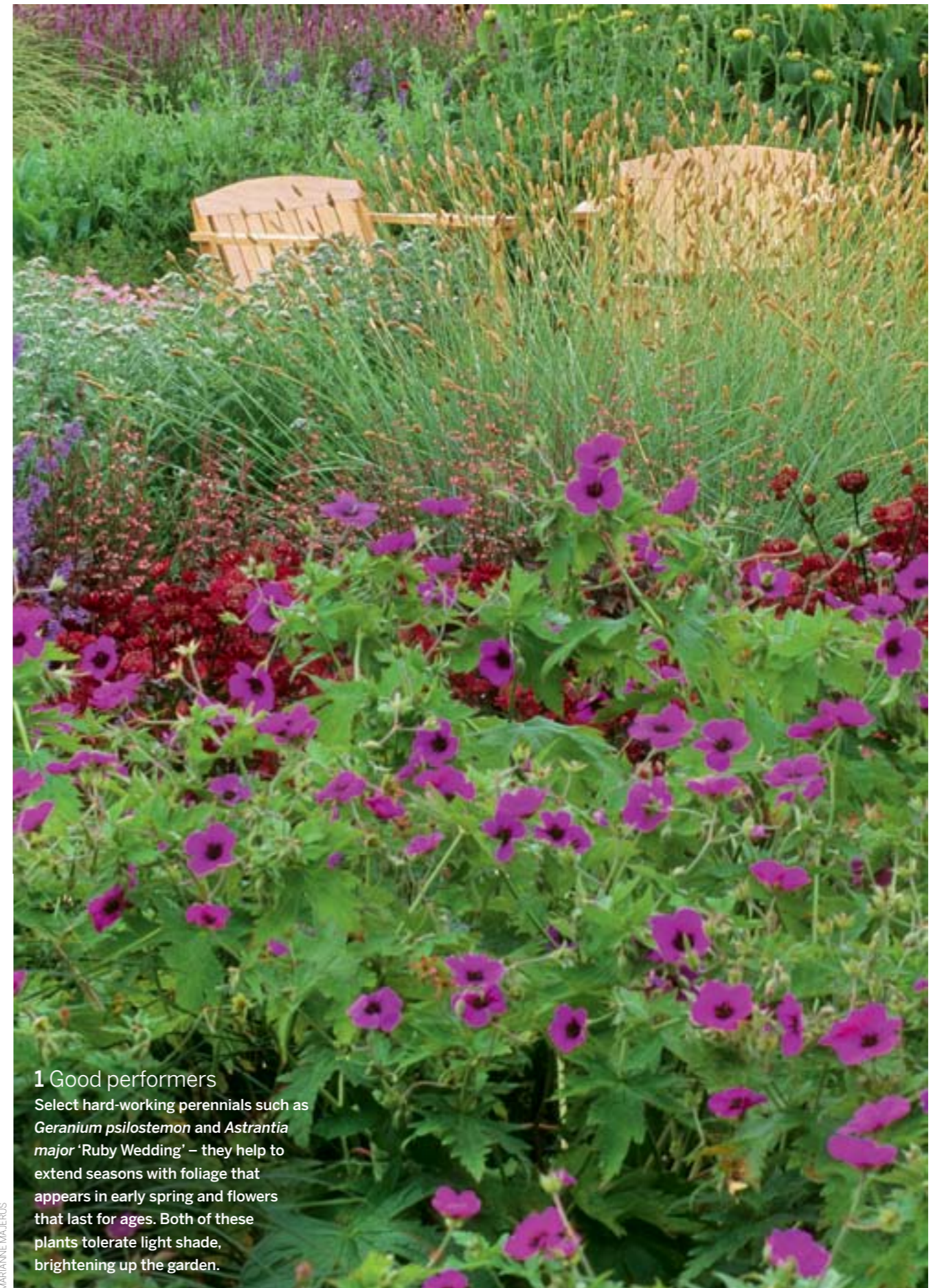
Leaves generally emerge before the flowers on most plants and will tend to last long after the flowers have faded, so it makes sense to take advantage of the wonderful range of greens that are available. For example, *Euphorbia polychroma* heralds the spring creating delightful mounds of vivid yellow-green. *Ballota pseudodictamnus* a tough, silvery-green character provides excellent low-level structure. The grey-greens are so useful as they will happily sit next to almost any other colour in the border. Then there are the sombre dark-greens that add depth and richness to a garden. Shrubs such as *Viburnum rhytidophyllum*, that so often get overlooked, with

its dark, velvety leaves, makes a very handsome backdrop. Variegated leaves, although not to everyone's taste, can be very uplifting on a grim winter's day. Take *Elaeagnus x ebbingei* 'Gilt Edge', perfect for a gloomy corner of the garden where lesser shrubs would struggle, its yellow leaf margins shine out and demand attention.

Make it last

Maintaining colour interest from May to August is relatively easy to achieve and many gardens look their best during this period. But making an impact from late summer through to the end of winter can prove to be much more of a challenge. So it's a good idea to focus on plants that have an extended flowering period, perennials such as *Geranium psilostemon* and *Astrantia major* will happily flower for months on end from spring to late autumn. But for the long winter stretch you could choose *Helleborus foetidus* and *Heuchera micrantha* 'Obsidian' to work their magic. Using coloured stems and ornamental bark is another way of continuing colour through the winter. Trees such as *Prunus serrula* and *Betula utilis* var. *jacquemontii* are popular choices with their striking, coloured bark. If you would like something a little more unusual then explore other *Betula* species, such as *ermanii* with glorious cappuccino-coloured bark fading to creamy-white. Select trees and shrubs that have two or more seasons of interest, for instance *Amelanchier lamarckii* starts off in early spring with soft pink buds, closely followed by

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1 Good performers

Select hard-working perennials such as *Geranium psilostemon* and *Astrantia major* 'Ruby Wedding' – they help to extend seasons with foliage that appears in early spring and flowers that last for ages. Both of these plants tolerate light shade, brightening up the garden.

MARIANNE MAJERUS

*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society.
†Hardiness ratings given where available.

2 Plant combinations

I use clematis a lot in my planting designs; they are so useful for adding another season of interest to a tree or shrub. The lime green *Robinia pseudoacacia* leaves are perfectly contrasted by the burgundy flowers of the clematis 'Étoile Violette', offering late summer pizzazz.



3 Touches of colour

This outdoor potting bench and sink has been enhanced by my client's homemade, mosaic splash back. Even the more utilitarian areas of a garden can be brightened up, using colourful materials such as mosaic tiles, stone or glass.



4 Bright berries

The winter garden does not have to be dull and drab. These branches of *Crataegus monogyna* are covered with bright red berries and are draped with the wonderful, fluffy seed heads of *Clematis vitalba*.



5 Interesting bark

If you are going to plant a tree with decorative bark such as this *Prunus serrula*, make sure that it is positioned where it will catch the winter sun and is easily viewed from the house in winter.



6 Sensational shrubs

One of my very favourite shrubs, *Itea ilicifolia* has so much to offer. An elegant, evergreen wall shrub with delicate greenish-white racemes that can grow up to 40cm in length!



7 Green carpet

Carex and *Alchemilla mollis* planted together are perfect partners, brightening up a lightly shaded area of the garden. Underplant this with summer bulbs to really add a zing to the combination.



8 Texture and tone

A dry, shady border at West Dean Gardens in West Sussex is planted with a superb mix of ground cover perennials. The spotty-leaved *Pulmonaria* will provide early spring interest and the heart-shaped *Epimedium* will carry on through the long winter.

9 Dark foliage

With so many heucheras available it can be a difficult choice but I come back to this one time after time. *Heuchera* 'Obsidian' is one of the darkest, with stunning purple-black leaves that often persist through winter. For sheer drama, underplant it with orange tulips.

10 Evergreen interest

It can be challenging to find a tough and interesting evergreen shrub for a dark and gloomy corner of the garden. *Elaeagnus x ebbingei* 'Gilt Edge' will happily take that spot and its variegated leaves brighten up the darkest winter day.

Inspirational books for further reading

- *Colour in the Garden* by Val Bourne (Merrell, £18.95) Ideas for each season.
- *Colour in Your Garden* by Penelope Hobhouse (Frances Lincoln, £19.99) An invaluable source.
- *The Gardening Year* by Christopher Lloyd (Frances Lincoln, £18.99) Every gardener's bible.
- *The Hillier Gardeners' Guides – The Winter Garden* by Jane Sterndale-Bennett (David & Charles, £14.99) Ideas for for winter interest.
- *Successional Planting for Adventurous Gardeners* by Christopher Lloyd (BBC, £25) Create little bit of Great Dixter at home.



11 Grey-green

Ballota pseudodictamnus has a soft, velvety texture that belies how tough it really is. This sturdy evergreen offers structure all year round: the gentle shade of grey blends happily with any colour and it works well in dry conditions.



12 Winter cheer

This is the plant that you should reach for when you need something that is not too large, will happily grow in dry shade and provide delicate, winter interest. Don't let the name (stinking hellebore) put you off, just call it *Helleborus foetidus* and enjoy!



13 Soothing green

Tom Stuart-Smith's gold-medal-winning garden for Laurent-Perrier at Chelsea Flower Show in 2008 was a celebration of texture and form, demonstrating how to use green and white to create a garden that soothes the soul.

14 Bulbs beyond spring

Nectaroscordum siculum is a particularly beautiful bulb. Grow them up through a carpet of ground cover to inject a splash of late spring colour, and enjoy watching them unfold.

15 Contrasting foliage

I spotted this dramatic colour combination at the RHS Gardens at Wisley. The inky-black *Ophiopogon planiscapus* 'Nigrescens' contrasts perfectly with the lime green *Hakonechloa macra*. Similar in form but strikingly different in colour, it leaps out from a shady border to surprise you.

starry-white flowers and finally ruby-red fruits with orange-red autumn leaves. *Viburnum opulus* is an excellent shrub for providing early summer flowers followed by richly coloured autumn foliage. *Salix* and *Cornus* are wonderfully tough shrubs, and if cut back hard the new growth provides vivid, winter colour that can work so well when surrounded by a carpet of spring bulbs such as *Galanthus*.

Be clever with climbers – for example grow a late summer-flowering *Clematis viticella* 'Polish Spirit' through an early flowering shrub such as *Photinia x fraseri* 'Red Robin'. This adds a whole new dimension to the shrub once it has finished flowering. For covering fences and walls, if you choose your clematis carefully it is possible to have colour every single month.

Use bulbs to inject shots of colour throughout the year; don't just save them for late winter or spring. They are ideal where space is really tight; try planting *Allium hollandicum* 'Purple Sensation' among low-growing perennials to add floating globes of colour in early summer. The later-flowering *Allium sphaerocephalon* benefits from being grown up through a wiry shrub with its bobbing, burgundy flowers resembling oversized bees.

Plan ahead

Careful planning is essential before ordering and planting. Remember the mantra 'right plant, right place'. Which basically means you should only select plants that will suit your site and conditions. First you need to consider all the horticultural

factors in your garden. This may narrow down the choices but does help you to choose the plants that will thrive. Starting with the soil, find out whether it is clay, loam, sand or chalk. The structure, texture and pH of the soil are extremely important and will influence how it holds water, nutrients and minerals. Think about the aspect and local climate; consider the areas of light and shade, which could differ significantly from area to area within one garden. Once you know all this information you can then select the appropriate plants.

The next thing to do is make a list all of the existing plants in the garden that you intend to keep. Divide them up into monthly columns according to their colour attributes (use a spread sheet if you are so inclined). Don't just focus on flowers but consider leaves, fruit, stems and bark! It should then be easy to identify when and where the colour interest dwindles during the year, and now you can plan your new plant list.

There are other ways of introducing colour into the garden in addition to plants. There is a huge range of hard landscaping materials to choose from. You can paint the walls and fences, or add decorative features into the garden such as mosaic, art and sculpture. Using materials or paint can be a very effective way of giving the garden a consistent backdrop or brightening up a dull space. Working with colour is great fun and everyone will have their personal colour preferences, so it's important to keep a focus on what you like. □

NEXT MONTH Be inspired!



Know your greens

Here is a list of plants that offer a variety of green tones.

Dark greens

- *Magnolia grandiflora* 'Blanchard' USDA 6a-10b[†]
- *Pileostegia viburnoides* AGM* RHS H4, USDA 8a-10b
- *Ruscus aculeatus* RHS H4, USDA 7a-9b
- *Viburnum rhytidophyllum* RHS H4, USDA 5a-8b

Silver greens

- *Astelia chathamica* AGM USDA 8b-11
- *Elaeagnus x ebbingei* RHS H4, USDA 7a-10b
- *Hippophae rhamnoides* AGM RHS H4, USDA 3a-7b
- *Sorbus aria* 'Lutescens' AGM RHS H4, USDA 5a-9b

Variegated

- *Azara microphylla* 'Variegata' RHS H3, USDA 8b-11
- *Fatsia japonica* 'Variegata' AGM RHS H3, USDA 8a-10a
- *Hakonechloa macra* 'Alboaurea' AGM RHS H4
- *Hosta* 'Golden Tiara' AGM RHS H4, USDA 3a-9a
- *Pleiblastus viridistriatus* AGM RHS H4, USDA 7a-11

Yellow greens

- *Carex elata* 'Aurea' AGM RHS H4, USDA 6a-9b
- *Caryopteris x clandonensis* 'Worcester Gold' AGM RHS H4, USDA 5a-9b
- *Gleditsia triacanthos* 'Sunburst' AGM
- *Philadelphus coronarius* 'Aureus' AGM RHS H4, USDA 5a-9a
- *Sambucus nigra* 'Aurea' AGM RHS H4

White greens

- *Astrantia major* subsp. *involuta* 'Shaggy' AGM RHS H4, USA 5a-9b
- *Eryngium giganteum* AGM RHS H4
- *Itea ilicifolia* AGM RHS H3, USDA 4a-9b