

Fall perennials: big, beautiful, tough as nails

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10/28/01

The trend in gardening seems to be toward tough plants, plants that can flourish without pampering such as lots of watering or fertilizing or pest control. Still, we love color in the landscape, too. Many of the perennials flowering in the fall flower garden satisfy all those requirements. They have spectacular color, yet they don't demand a lot of care.

- **Lion's ear:** One very striking orange flowered perennial goes by the common name of lion's ear. Its botanical name is *Leonotis leonurus*. Growing to four to five feet tall, with an almost equal spread, this shrubby perennial flowers only in the fall. But then it blooms with a profusion of the bright orange flowers.
- **Cigar flower:** A similarly colored flower is found on the cigar flower, *Cuphea micropetala*. Shaped like tiny cigars, the flowers on this plant are orange tipped with yellow. The shrubby plant grows to four to five feet tall with a similar spread. It's tough as nails.
- **Philippine violet** (*Barleria cristata*) is known to some people as a greenhouse plant. But we can grow Philippine violet outdoors here. Grown outdoors, the plant reaches a height of three to four feet, with a two to three foot spread. This time of year the plant is covered with dark lavender flowers. As the flowers fall from the plant, the ground beneath the plant becomes blanketed with color also.
- **Firespike** (*Odontonema strictum*) is an old favorite with many gardeners. Reaching a height of four to five feet, the plant is topped with tubular red flowers in early fall. Hummingbirds and some butterflies are drawn to the flowers. Firespike prefers partial shade or filtered sunlight.

Salvias: Numerous perennial salvias bloom heaviest in the fall. Most are three to five feet tall and are also attractive to hummingbirds.

- *Salvia leucantha* (Mexican sage): purple or purple and white flowers; one of the most popular.
- *Salvia regla*: orange flowers
- *Salvia elegans* (pineapple sage): bright red flowers
- *Salvia vanhouttii*: burgundy red flowers
- *Salvia madrensis*: yellow flowers
- *Salvia guaranitica*: dark blue or violet flowers
- *Salvia greggii*: red, pink, or white flowers on one to two foot tall plants
- *Salvia* x 'Indigo Spires': long spikes of blue-purple flowers

Other fall blooming perennials I would recommend planting include:

- **Swamp sunflower** and **willow-leaf sunflower** (*Helianthus angustifolius* and *H. salicifolius*). These are large plants with spectacularly brilliant yellow flowers.
- **Goldenrod:** There are even types of goldenrod sold in nurseries. The first time I ever saw goldenrod planted in someone's home garden I think was the first time I ever fully came to appreciate the beauty of this native plant we so often take for granted.
- **Chrysanthemums**, especially the pink flowering Korean mums, are also good fall-flowering perennials.
- **Ornamental grasses** combine beautifully with fall flowering perennials in the landscape. Many kinds of ornamental grasses are at their peak this time of year. Their flower and seed-heads, backlit by the autumn

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sunlight, make spectacular additions in the perennial bed or border.

Most of these perennials are killed to the ground by hard winter freezes. So, in late winter, cut the plants back. Then in spring, they'll re-sprout from the base and grow to again become large flowering plants by next fall. Most of these perennials also require a fairly sunny spot in order to flower well.

This month is one of the best times of the year for planting perennials. Planted now, the perennial plants will become well rooted over the winter and be better prepared to put on top growth in the spring. So, visit a local nursery, find the perennials you like, and get started planting so you, too, can enjoy the show of color next fall.

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