

## Fall Is a Spectacular Season in the Garden



*Lion's ear and Mexican bush sage (Salvia leucantha) are among the perennials blooming in the fall. Photo by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension.*

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Just as surely as Earth turns, autumn brings relief from the sweltering heat of summer. Because of all the spinning and tilting of our planet, September 23 marked our autumnal equinox. Temperatures begin to cool in sync with earth's tilt. We gardeners venture back outside because there is much to be seen.

Many plants in my north Florida garden are enjoying the season and are stepping out in celebration. They've donned their finest attire and are ready for their turn in the spotlight. They know that winter is approaching, and this is their last big fling.

**If you would like to see many of these plants in the Tallahassee area, attend the Horticulture Extravaganza at the Leon County Agriculture Center, 615 Paul Russell Road, this Saturday, October 18. Activities run from 10:00 a.m. to 4 p.m.** There will be slide shows on fall-blooming plants, garden tours, and much more. Visit the website, <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu/HortExtrav.htm> for more details.

A prima donna of my perennial border is forsythia sage (*Salvia madrensis*). Standing at attention near the back of the border, clear yellow flowers are held aloft to herald the season. Grown in a sturdy wire cage, it has filled in all the spaces with its conspicuously square stems. Even though the stocky stems look sturdy, I am not fooled. Last summer they blew over and broke during a strong wind, so this year I made sure that they had adequate support. My efforts paid off, because now they have 12-inch spikes of blossoms at the ends of every stem. I expect the show to last until frost.

Other salvias, too, are at their best in the fall. Mexican bush sage (*Salvia leucantha*) has been regaling gardeners with its spikes of purple and white bicolored flowers for about a month. Pineapple sage (*Salvia elegans*) beckons butterflies and hummers alike with its bright red flowers, and we humans often cannot resist plucking a leaf and enjoying its fruity fragrance. 'Indigo Spires' (*Salvia farinacea* x *longispicata*) has returned for a grand finale after its midsummer pruning.

Firespike (*Odontonema strictum*), is dressed fit-to-kill. Large avocado-like leaves have been fueling the plant all summer in order to produce a stem suitable for displaying such finery. Now it stands about four feet tall and is adorned with tubular, bright red flowers that almost smother the 12-inch spikes.

## Fall Is a Spectacular Season for Us

Near the firespike is firebush (*Hamelia patens*). This Florida native has been putting out its clusters of reddish-orange, tubular blossoms all summer. Now its leaves are beginning to turn red, and it is getting ready to go out in a blaze of glory. Turks' Cap (*Malvaviscus arboreus*) has adorned itself with bright red, spiraled flowers that hang from its limbs in glorious profusion. Sharing a shrub border with our native beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*), the two upstage their less colorful compatriots.

Gingers are in rare form after a summer of plentiful rain. Some of the blossoms have faded, but tropical foliage stands tall and reminds one of the spectacular blossoms that were held on the ends of head-high stems on the likes of butterfly and Kahili ginger. The banana like leaves of the Curcumas often hide the colorful spikes. Spiral gingers add texture and color of their own, and the dancing girls (*Globba*) frolic with careless abandon at the feet of their taller cousins. Pine cone ginger (*Zingiber zerumbet*) pushed up sturdy "pine cones" earlier in the summer, and for fall they have turned bright red. While the variegated foliage of the beautiful shell gingers brightens the border, I do not expect them to bloom.

Golden dewdrop (*Duranta repens*) sports its lavender flowers and golden berries to delight humans and critters alike. Princess flower (*Tibouchina urvilleana*) enchants us with flush after flush of royal purple blooms.

Most of the cupheas are in fine fettle. Cigar plants (*Cuphea ignea*) are loaded with yellow-tipped red-orange flowers. Bat-face cuphea (*Cuphea llavea*) is laden with tiny purple bats' faces that have big red ears. Fine textured Mexican heather (*Cuphea hyssopifolia*) and *Cuphea varia* add gracefulness and refinement with their presence. Even though these long-blooming cupheas look delicate, they are anything but weaklings. They've been through the thick and thin of it—all summer long, and are none the worse for wear.

Blue butterfly bush or blue glory bower (*Clerodendron myricoides* cv. *Ugandense*) is one of the unusual plants in the border. The blue flowers resemble a group of blue butterflies congregating on the stems. Flowers have five petals—four light blue and one cobalt blue. Stamens project gracefully from the center of the pale blue petals looking for all the world like upside-down butterflies.

Lion's ear (*Leonotis leonurus*), a striking orange-flowered shrub, goes by the common name of lion's ear or lion's mane. It grows four to five feet tall with an almost equal spread. Lion's ear flowers in the fall with a profusion of bright orange flowers that hug the stems in a circle at intervals along the stems.

Ornamental grasses combine beautifully with fall-flowering perennials. Their flowers and seed heads, backlit by the autumn sunlight, make spectacular additions to the garden.

Enjoy it now, for it will soon be gone. That's part of what makes it so special, you know. If it looked like this all year, we'd quickly tire of it. For everything there is a season, and now is the time for fall.

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