

Chocolate and Espresso in the Garden

by Honey Sharp

Chocolate and espresso plants are cool. And I'm not talking about cocoa bean plants or *coffea arabica*, originally from Ethiopia. No, it's those dark, sexy ornamental plants that have been steadily gaining ground among garden aficionados.

Although dark palette plants may not, per se, offer such tantalizing aromas and tastes (although I've heard of one ... but more about it later), they make for a bold statement that adds drama, magic and a touch of mystery to any garden.

Old standbys like the elegant tulip, 'Queen of Night', the tropical Ipomea, or sweet potato vine, 'Blackie' and the hollyhock nigra have been gracing our gardens for years. Once de rigueur and adorning the lace-curtained window sills of Victorian homes, are those velvety Coleus splashed with tangerine, copper, lime and obsidian brushstrokes that have made quite a comeback. It is always those black ones, bordering on the Gothic, that catch my eye.

Perhaps we can thank our 21st century Starbucks culture for this trend that indulges in coffee and in 80% cocoa chocolate. And, should you refrain from such epicurean (or is it addictive?) pleasures, you can always delect in black fruits, vegetables and even seafood. Think of blackberries and ever so dark cherries, shiny eggplants, and squid infused with ebony ink. However, some, such as chokeberries, with their dangling black pearled-shaped berries, are not edible - hence the name.

But are we really talking about "true" black or 'Serious Black' as one clematis has been dubbed? While nurseries and catalogues are promoting them, the reality is more about deep and dense mahoganies, purples, maroons and bordeaux. The deft hands of horticulturists and plant propagators emphasize their darkness. Marketers turn around and label them "black".

And what labels! Not only will you find yourself sliding back to your childhood as you encounter "Black Beauty" but you may also rediscover a more risqué youth - or mid-life crisis - that involved sex and gambling. 'Black Stockings' *Thalictrum*, 'Black Negligee' *Cimicifuga* and 'Black Jack' *Sedum* all await. And your rich chocolate colored soil, enhanced with some good manure, or while you're at it, coffee grounds, will welcome them with open arms.

So, if you're a blackoholic, a whole slew of perennials, annuals, grasses and woody plants awaits. There's even a nursery called Chocolate Colored Farm outside of Seattle (where else?) that offers hundred of species and cultivars suited to every season. 'And we have "after hours" nursery', as one of their owners, Marie Lincoln joked while we recently chatted on the phone.

To bring a hit of espresso in the garden throughout the growing season, an almost overwhelming range of plants exists. For April or May, consider the

statuesque *Fritularia persica*, a bulbous plant that dates as far back as circa 1585. Overflowing with plum-colored, bell-shaped flowers, it towers above smaller spring plants hugging the ground. You can also choose the exotic tulip, 'Black Parrot', with its ruffled plumage. Or if deer or voles present a problem, the smooth bearded iris, 'Hello Darkness'. Even better is the Prada-like *Iris tuberosa*, 'Snake's Head' with its pearl and amethyst/black petals, also a 16th century heirloom.

For June, the native *Penstemon* or Beardtongue, is a favorite of mine as it appears in nice clumps that burst overnight with small white flowers along their purple/red stems. Later, in mid-summer, don't despair: you can impress your visitors with the tall and ever so elegant *Cimicifuga* 'Hillside Black Beauty' or 'Brunette', a more vigorous and fragrant variety, according to Lincoln. With its purple/brown ribbed and elliptical leaves and its arching stems, topped by nodding, billowy white flowers it is a knock-out. Year after year, it will return in its full glory.

For continuity from spring to fall, you can choose from a variety of dramatic plants including annuals such as violas and grasses such as *Carex* 'Cappuccino' and, of course, 'Milk Chocolate'. When it comes to woody plants, the copper beech, with its gnarled trunk, continues to be the queen of the landscape. Referred to as "copper", its foliage, especially after a soaking rain, resembles more a bottle of burgundy wine.

The newest kid on the block: the 'Black Lace' *Sambucus nigra* or elderberry, called the poor man's Japanese maple, will rival, but may not surpass, the elegant but sometimes fickle stand-by. A woody plant that, like a *Spirea* and *Salix*, can be cut back in early spring to accommodate a smaller garden, this elderberry is adorned with lacy, ebony foliage with a hint of green in its newer leaves. And, it also comes in a yellow/amber color and is called 'Sutherland Gold'.

Obviously, a moonless and starless night garden can't work on its own. However, with good design including the use of texture and contrasting colors such as white or chartreuse, black accents make for a dramatic garden. And, if you are yearning for that *je ne sais quoi* aroma, a *Clematis* is now on the market. Its name still remains a mystery - just like black...