

Late Bloomers

Part 1: Autumn's Grasses, Bulbs and Perennials

by Honey Sharp

Before stuffing frilly purple cabbages or grandmother's period style cream-colored mums in the trunk, consider a few less staid candidates for the fall garden. Engulfed by glorious colors along the roadsides, we might also forget that our own gardens can put on a pretty good display as well. All it takes is a little research and some creative planning.

Granted, we may become a bit distracted - call it overwhelmed - by our sugar maples turning into giant amber and garnet jewels, but why not bring some of that bounty home? And yes, even though we can arrange plump orange pumpkins, gourds and acorn squashes on the doorstep, consider a more long term perspective when the impatiens get zapped by the first frost.

A rich, new palette emerges during New England's harvest season. For one, the gardens appear magically bathed in a softer, sweeter light. For another, the deep purple native asters and sapphire monkshoods among other perennials assume a brilliant, almost luminous quality. Finally, more subtle grasses take on their earthy and subtle tones.

Ultimately though, it's about us as gardeners. No longer toiling over weeds and deadheading annuals, we can take a moment to pause. The time for auto-detailing has passed. A touch of messiness is just fine, thank you.

For me, September holds a particular botanical 'identity'. Grasses, allotted the time to come into their own, are at their peak; late perennials, thriving in cooler weather and shorter days, are making a bold entrance while reblooming bearded irises are graciously offering an unexpected, repeat performance.

And let's not forget those cheerful fall crocus bulbs or *Colchicum*. Appearing almost overnight in a spectrum of colors from pearl white to bubble gum pink, they are a pure delight. I never cease to be amazed how a newly planted bulb would bloom in almost the blink of an eye. Come to think of it, should you forget them in the tool shed, they'll still put on a show!

De rigueur are ornamental grasses that gradually turn in colors that include pale yellow straw to rusty bronzes, many of which can be seen on the same plant. Proudly displaying their ethereal 'plumes,' known as inflorescences, (in fact, clusters of small flowers), they are all the more spectacular when backlit by the late afternoon sun.

While the giant *Miscanthus* grasses maintain a statuesque presence, native switch grasses, such as *Panicum virgatum* 'Heavy metal' and its smaller cousin, 'Cloud Nine' take on a particular glowing quality. As they sway in a breeze, their tips appear touched by a fine brush dipped in a salmon pink watercolor. Combined with the majestic Joe Pye Weed with its buxom flowers lasting through September, the two make for quite a pair.

If one is after slender, golden peach plumes, also consider the *Calamagrostis* 'Karl Forester'. A tall, upright feather reed grass, its shiny emerald leaves make for a serene backdrop in the garden in the summer as well. And, should one be on the lookout for smaller candidates along a border, the exotic and hardy Japanese blood grass offers a stunning statement. Complimented by silver, velvety lambs' ears, their garnet red leaves offer fall color at its peak.

When it comes to designing with grasses, one can enjoy them as in the back of the border or as a living fence. By emphasizing and repeating smaller ones such as fescues or Japanese blood grasses, they beckon one forward. Best of all, they don't disappear come winter.

When it comes to perennial candidates, high on my list are those with consistent attractive foliage such as *Cimicifuga* or Bugbane (now classified as *Actea*) with stems and leaves ranging from

traditional greens to mauves and maroons. Architectural in form by summer, their long, arching candle-like white flowers persist into fall. Most renowned - and patented - is 'Hillside Black Beauty', reminiscent of a glass of Pinot Noir. The beauty of its foliage never fails.

Reaching up to five feet is *Boltonia* 'Snowbank' with its blue green foliage and clouds of small white daisies punctuated by yellow centers. Blooming in full sun from July through September, its eye-catching beauty works with a host of plants from Autumn Joy sedums to Russian sages and ornamental grasses. It's also a butterfly nectar source and hummingbird attractor.

When it comes to fall bloomers, for Amy Olmsted from Ward's Nursery, false plumbago or *Ceratostigma*, with its small, blue flowers and foliage that turns progressively mahogany red, is a favorite ground-cover. The azure Gentian, a large genus with about 400 species that display trumpet-shaped flowers is also attractive and works in rock gardens. According to Pliny the Elder, Gentian is an eponym of Gentius, the King of Illyria (first century BC) who is said to have discovered its healing properties. In addition, its roots were harvested to manufacture tonic liquor, such as "Suze" in France. However, its flowers, like those of monkshood, are quite poisonous.

While sugar maples along the country road and pumpkins in the vegetable patch remain autumn's stalwarts, other exciting possibilities abound for extending the gardening season.