

COLOR

A Celebration in the Garden, Part 2

Honey Sharp

“Of all the visual enticements gardening has to offer, none has the punch, immediacy, or emotional appeal of color,” Taylor’s Master Guide to Gardening

In my April article, “COLOR: Part 1”, I touched on a few fundamentals concerning the central role color plays in making for a vibrant and enticing garden. Broaching the vast subject of color theory, I also deferred to a few experts such as Gertrude Jekyll, a well-known British gardener, watercolorist and color theorist. Of the same époque as the French impressionists, she assiduously developed basic axioms or “rules”, as she called them, pertaining to the color wheel and how they can be applied to gardens and art alike. Upon visiting her garden in 1908, a visitor exclaimed: “the colouring is gorgeous ... the cool coloured ends have a groundwork of quiet, low-toned bluish green, as of yucca and iris ... and of gray and silvery tones in large masses represented by *santolina* and *Cineria maritima* with white and palest pink flowers only.”

Color combinations—be they in tapestries, flower beds or simply the clothes we wear—are all about contrasts or complements and harmonies. Primary reds and greens, at polar ends of the color wheel, form powerful contrasts while a mix of blues, silvers and pinks or, on a warmer scale, yellows and peaches are ... well, harmonious. Neither scenario is “better” than the other. It’s all a matter of personal taste. However, using a color palette in a mindful, albeit intuitive, manner doesn’t hurt either. Indeed, by exploring the many possibilities of color, one can establish peaceful, soothing effects or dynamic, even jarring, but exhilarating ones.

Plant material is not the only actor. Not to be ignored is hardscape: the paint on our house, the presence of a pool, pond or stream, outdoor, painted furniture, as well as ornamental pots, birdbaths or a gazebo. Be they backdrops or focal points, all contribute to the entire gestalt.

In March, I was fortunate to visit the world-renowned, public *Jardin Majorelle* in Marrakech, Morocco, a contemporary Moorish garden which celebrates cobalt blue, an unworldly color. Sure, we’ve seen it on Adirondack chairs and glossy, ceramic pots but used solid on walls, fountains and thin water canals, reminiscent of Naumkeag, gave me an electric charge. And yet, it did not compete with or overpower the many cactus, water plants and bamboo featured. Instead it added drama. Needless to say, Yves Saint Laurent was responsible for restoring and renovating this garden.

Light is another principal player. Since gardens are naturally lit by the sun, they are influenced by the time of day and even the time of year. Think of how an autumn sun casts a warm light as it sinks lower on the horizon. Seasonal change, particularly in temperate areas, also contribute to the color spectrum of our flora. As nature comes to life in spring, subtle and soft greens enhanced by the whites and pale pinks of Trillium or the yellows of Marsh marigolds or just plain ol' daffodils emerge. As summer bursts upon the scene so do hot colors.



Think of *Echinacea*, black-eyed Susans or brilliant, glowing sunflowers. Come fall though and ochre and saffron earth tones take center stage. (Of course, there is always an exception: New England's fireworks display before the world is reduced to grays.)

Although, as the joke goes, it may be "all about timing", it's also about place. A garden in shade is a challenge to a gardener who loves sexy, ardent colors. Instead, resigning oneself to a more "pastel look" might be called for. This is when silvery Japanese ferns, Siberian Bugloss 'Jack Frost', astilbes and impatiens come to the rescue. Greens as in the many hues of hostas and ferns also play a role. Just think of a woodland garden as more ethereal, less in your face.

Which brings me to: How do we develop—no, celebrate a personal color palette? As we all know, color preferences are almost innate. They reflect our personalities, moods as well as the whims of the day. For example, black 'Queen of the Night' tulips and 'Black Lace' Elderberries have all been the rage lately, stemming perhaps from our passion for 80% dark chocolate...

Now the nuts and bolts. When it comes to specific, individual taste, if blue is "your" color, consider combining its many shades from muted baby blues to indigos. Needless to say though, flowers don't always comply... (And if you don't live by the sea and have acid soil, forget about blue hydrangea!) Still, with a little creative strategy you can brush a few fescues against tall sea hollies or *Echinops* (thistles). Their contrasting textures also make it work. This is not to say that a mass of 'Crater Lake Blue' *Veronicas* or *Baptisias* will not fit the bill.

And, don't forget enticing fruit bearing shrubs such as blueberries, *Callicarpa* (beautyberries) or chokeberries.

Should pinks be a favorite, they are greatly enhanced by creams, apricots and mauves. The 'Pink Form' poppy next to an old fashioned white peony is delicious. Weaving strands of pearl whites as offered by Japanese anemones or phlox is always a way to go pastel. And, of course, green remains a constant. It is the "canvas".

For my own taste, deep, saturated plumy reds offer an elegant look. They work well in contrast to silvers, lime greens and yellows. From late spring to fall, candidates abound such as Alliums, *Sanguisorba* or burnet, *Penstemon* 'Husker Red', and more Coleus than you can possibly choose from. A Japanese maple or a smoke bush with its quasi-translucent, burgundy wine leaves are at the top of the line.

When it comes to bold, hot colors, reds and oranges inevitably make a statement when used either en masse or as focal points. Scarlet dahlias, bee balms, or 'Fireland' yarrows, also symbolize summer's peak. Not only do they possess visual shock value, they draw the eye and also attract pollinators. As repeated focal points, they also tie a garden all together.

The fact that hot colors continue to pose a challenge to me—especially since I'm dealing with a barn red old farmhouse—makes them somehow even more appealing. Taking it a step further, the element of sheer play enters when such colors are used as complements. From uninhibited splashes of color to dare- devil fushia/magenta/pink bouganvillas scrambling up a wall by crimson red roses (in my dream home in Oaxaca ...), endless possibilities abound. What would Gertrude Jekyll think?