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Pleasing Purple Foliage

Deciduous Magnolias

Unusual Heath Family
Natives

Tuning in to Garden
Sounds



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Photograph by Rob Cardillo

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Purple-Leaved Perennials *pack a punch*

BY GRAHAM RICE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUDYWHITE

If you're looking for a quick way to add drama to a pedestrian landscape, including a variety of plants with dark foliage will do the trick.

PURPLE IS NOT the first color we associate with foliage, so when we see it in the garden, it always makes an impression. Alone and in company with other plants, purple foliage lends a silky sumptuousness, enticing depth, and rich opulence to beds and borders in all styles of landscapes.

First, it must be noted that few perennials—and in this I am including tender perennials generally grown as annuals—have foliage that is as genuinely purple as that of flowers. In the context of leaves, “purple” is a rather loose term used to describe a huge range of colors from the smoky brown of *Crocosmia* ‘Solfatare’ to the pure black of *Ophiopogon planiscapus* ‘Nigrescens’. Deciding where to draw the line between bronze, burgundy, crimson, and purple is subjective. But why be too particular? The perennials and annuals that feature purple and close-to-purple foliage are invaluable for adding flair to planting combinations. Some are so bold yet elegant in their habit and exquisite in their coloring that they can stand as specimens in their own right, while many others are smaller and better integrated with other plants to make intriguing, season-spanning displays.

PURPLE-LEAVED SPECIMEN PLANTS

For sheer sparkle, the aptly named *Lysimachia ciliata* ‘Firecracker’ (USDA



The purple leaves of ‘Firecracker’, a cultivar of loosestrife (*Lysimachia ciliata*), are attractive on their own and as a backdrop for the plant’s yellow flowers in summer.

Zones 5–8, AHS Zones 9–3) stands head and shoulders above the rest in this taller group. The foliage is a deep and solid purple from the moment the new shoots peep through in spring. In summer, five-petaled, yellow flowers open dramatically against the dusky foliage—like big sunny buttercups. Growing two to four feet tall, this American native is a gentle spreader in the heavy soil of my Penn-

sylvania garden, but it has a reputation for being more aggressive under other conditions, so it may be prudent to grow it in a container.

The much lauded cultivar of white snakeroot (*Eupatorium rugosum*, Zones 4–8, 8–2) called ‘Chocolate’ is a three- to five-foot-tall plant that produces somewhat muddy white flowers that I do not find very attractive. To allow the toothed



Above, left: Dark-leaved and red-flowered 'Bishop of Llandaff' dahlia pairs well in this bed with the softer colors of *Aster x frikartii*. Above, right: In this purple-themed garden, 'King Humbert' canna rises from a bed of beefsteak plant (*Perilla frutescens*) and cleome.

purple foliage to shine, I cut the plant back by half as the flower buds start to form to allow a new flush of leaf growth.

A mature specimen of 'Black Negligee' bugbane (*Actaea simplex*, Zones 4–8, 8–1), with its bold, dark, finely divided foliage is a picture in itself even before its purple-tinted creamy plumes of fragrant flowers appear in early fall. Its upright habit—to about four feet tall—and the pattern of its dark foliage stands out when it is set against a background of silvery shrubs. Other purple-leaved bugbane cultivars of merit include 'Brunette', which grows to about three feet tall (Zones 4–8, 8–1), and the newer 'James Compton', which grows to three-and-a-half feet tall and has lighter bronze-purple foliage (Zones 3–9, 8–1). These named cultivars must be vegetatively propagated to retain their purple coloring. Beware the more widely available purple-leaved bugbanes labeled 'Atropurpurea' or Atropurpurea Group: These are raised from seed, and their coloring varies, some even becoming green.

Growing three to four feet tall and four to five feet wide, *Persicaria microcephala* 'Red Dragon' (Zones 5–8, 8–1) makes a bold feature for borders and large containers with its chevron-patterned, purple,

green, and gray foliage. It is also a great intermingler that works well with white-flowering fall anemones. Plants develop the best color in cooler areas.

Even more imposing are cannas (*Canna* spp., Zones 7–11, 12–1), which are usually treated as annuals in cooler parts of the country but are perennial where winters are mild. 'King Humbert' (sometimes listed as 'Roi Humbert'), with orange flowers and deep purplish-bronze leaves, is an old favorite. It works well in a bed underplanted with the more vividly purple beefsteak plant (*Perilla frutescens*) and accented with bright

sparks provided by the lighter purple flowers of *Cleome hassleriana* 'Violet Queen'. The more recent 'Australia' ('Feuerzauber') is an even more spectacular canna. Its foliage is a rich, dark and sultry color, with a sleek shimmer to the surface—and it lasts right through the summer without fading to green. Above the five-foot-long foliage the big, bright scarlet flowers fire up the garden.

Dark-leaved cultivars of dahlias (*Dahlia* spp., Zones 9–11, 9–3) have recently enjoyed a revival. Among the best is venerable 'Bishop of Llandaff', which received the Royal Horticultural Society's Award of Garden Merit in 1928. Plants grow two to four feet tall with toothed, deep mahogany foliage that sets off vivid red, semi-double summer blooms. It stands out brightly next to the soft purple flowers of *Aster x frikartii*. It's also superb with *Crocsmia* 'Lucifer' and with *Lobelia* 'Dark Crusader', all in front of yellow foliage or purple-leaved smoke bush (*Cotinus cogglyria*) such as 'Royal Purple'. As with cannas, dahlias are often grown as annuals but are reliable perennials in warmer zones.

Fast-growing castor oil or castor bean plant (*Ricinus communis*) 'Carmencita' is large, reaching six to 10 feet tall, and has

Sources

Glasshouse Works, Stewart, OH.
(800) 837-2142.

www.glasshouseworks.com.

Heronwood Nursery, Warminster, PA. (866) 578-7948.

www.heronwood.com.

Kartuz Greenhouses, Vista, CA.

(760) 941-3613. www.kartuz.com.

Plant Delights Nursery, Raleigh, NC.

(919) 772-4794.

www.plantdelights.com.

brown-purple leaves. 'Impala' (brown-purple) and 'New Zealand Purple' (maroon-purple) are smaller, growing three to five feet tall. Their palmate leaves add a tropical feel to gardens. They are perennial in USDA Zones 9 to 11 and superb seed-raised annuals in cooler regions that have hot summers. Because these plants bear beautiful but deadly poisonous seeds, they are not for gardens with young children.

Several hardy hibiscuses (*Hibiscus* spp., Zones 4–9, 9–1) are available that not only feature dark leaves but large, striking summer flowers. 'Kopper King' grows three to four feet tall and has bronze foliage and 12-inch, white to pinkish flowers with a red eye; 'Midnight Marvel' has darker leaves than 'Kopper King', grows about four feet tall, and bears bright red, eight- to nine-inch flowers; and 'Summer Storm' grows four to five feet tall and has wine-purple foliage and eight- to 10-inch pink flowers with a dark pink eye.

With huge, arrow-shaped leaves, elephant ears (*Colocasia* spp., Zones 9–11, 12–3) can't be missed in a garden. This tropical perennial grows from tubers and must be brought indoors in winter in cold regions. 'Black Magic', one of the early dark-leaved introductions, has mid-sized leaves about two feet long. 'Diamond Head' is a more recent introduction with slightly ruffled, one-and-a-half-foot long, glossy, brown-purple leaves.

PURPLE LEAVES FOR BEDS AND BORDERS

Coming down in scale, smaller plants are better used to form a tapestry of colors and shapes at the front of the border and also in smaller containers. First in line here must be cultivars of coral bells or heuchera (*Heuchera* spp.). In fact, heuchera selections like 'Plum Pudding' (Zones 4–8, 8–1) work both as mini-specimens to mark a corner floating above a carpet of yellow-leaved *Lysimachia nummularia* 'Aurea' or as partners in pretty plant associations with brunneras, like the brightly contrasting silver-leaved *Brunnera macrophylla* 'Jack Frost'. The foliage of the old favorites 'Palace Purple' and 'Chocolate Ruffles' are more or less bronze, but recently some new closer-to-purple-leaved heucheras have arrived, including 'Frosted Violet', 'Plum Royale', and 'Shanghai' for the cooler north and 'Beaujolais', 'Magnum', and 'Midnight



The richly patterned silver-and-green leaves of *Brunnera macrophylla* 'Jack Frost' provide a refreshing contrast with the vivid red-purple leaves of 'Plum Pudding' heuchera.

Bayou' for the hot and humid south.

Many good new varieties of dark-leaved sedums (*Hylotelephium* spp., formerly *Sedum* spp.) are now available, including the stellar 'Purple Emperor' (Zones 3–9, 9–1), which only grows about 15 inches tall. Its purple stems and foliage make striking upright clumps in the run up to autumn's pinkish flowers. Other burgundy to purple-foliaged sedums are 'Xenox' and 'Plum Perfection'.

Coleus (*Solenostemon* spp., Zones 9–11, 12–1), are superb annual foliage plants and feature purples aplenty. 'Chocolate Mint' has broad purple leaves edged in lime that are lovely with white petunias. It grows 12 to 20 inches tall and has an upright habit. Others in various shades and combinations of brownish red to chocolate-purple include 'Merlot' (12 to 14 inches tall), 'Black Dragon' (12 to 18 inches tall), and 'Dark Star' (12 to 24 inches tall).

GROWING PURPLE IN WARM REGIONS

Gardeners in the warmer zones, generally from USDA Zones 9 to 11, can grow many of the purple-leaved plants in the article, including elephant ears (*Colocasia* spp.), cannas, *Echeveria* 'Afterglow', castor bean plant (*Ricinus communis*), and coleus (*Solenostemon* spp.)—with the added advantage of being able to leave them outdoors year round. Here are more plants that are well suited to these regions.

***Acalypha wilkesiana* cultivars** (copperleaf, Joseph's coat, Zones 9–11, 11–9). An evergreen shrub that can grow to 10 feet tall; copper color of foliage is best in full sun. 'Ceylon' has red-copper leaves with pink edges. 'Haleakala' has bronze-maroon leaves. 'Raggedy Ann' from Australia has narrow maroon leaves with finely cut edges.

***Dyckia* 'Burgundy Ice'** (Zones 9–11, 11–8). This hybrid bromeliad has rosettes of narrow red-purple leaves edged with white spines. It grows just six inches tall by 12 inches wide and is drought tolerant.

Hibiscus acetocella (Zones 8–11, 11–8). Unlike many hibiscus, this is a species of subshrub or woody perennial that is grown not for its flowers—which are red and bloom infrequently—but for its burgundy foliage that resembles that of maple. North of Zone 9, it is grown as an annual. 'Maple Sugar' is a cultivar that grows to five feet tall. 'Panama Red', from the University of Georgia's Athens Select program, is bred to retain the deep burgundy-red of its foliage even in summer heat and humidity. Plants grow about four feet tall.

Opuntia santa-rita (Santa Rita prickly pear, Zones 8–11, 12–7). This cactus is a color-changer: New pads are purplish, maturing to green, then turn purple again in fall. It grows three to five feet tall and produces yellow spring flowers.

Perilla frutescens* var. *crispa and ***P. frutescens* 'Magellanica'** (beefsteak plant or shiso, Zones 0–0, 12–1). A member of the mint family, beefsteak plant needs bright sun for the best leaf color. Beefsteak plant has purple-bronze, deeply toothed leaves and grows under three feet tall. The cultivar 'Magellanica' has brown-and-green coleuslike leaves splashed in the center with reddish-purple and grows 18 inches tall. To maintain a vigorous leaf display, and reduce its tendency to self-sow, remove flowers as soon as they form.

Strobilanthes dyerianus (Persian shield, Zones 9–11, 11–9). Brilliant red-purple leaves with dark green veining have an attractive silvery sheen. It grows to three feet tall, tolerates heat (but not drought), and is good for containers and in shade, where its colors are brightest.

—G.R.



Hibiscus acetocella



Strobilanthes dyerianus with pink petunias

Plants with dense but penetrable tangles of billowing growth are always valuable because bolder companions can be planted to surge up through them. The foliage of *Clematis recta* 'Purpurea' (Zones 4–11, 9–1) makes a tall—to six feet—thundercloud topped, in late summer, with a fluffier cumulus of starry, white, fragrant flowers; it needs a substantial companion—silver-leaved globe artichokes, perhaps.

Another plant known for its airy form is the four- to five-foot-tall purple fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare* 'Purpureum', Zones 4–9, 9–1). Clouds of smoky purple threads form a mound in early spring among which yellow, white, or black tulips such as 'Queen of the Night' make striking combinations. Purple fennel also works well with sultry purple irises and deep red peonies, both of which feature stronger versions of the tones in the fen-

nel foliage. Chop the fennel back after flowering—or even before—to keep it compact and prevent the garden being smothered by seedlings.

PURPLE-LEAVED GROUNDCOVERS

There are a number of worthy dark-leaved groundcover plants. 'Dark Reiter' is a superb cranesbill (*Geranium pratense*) that looks most purple in its new growth. It is delightful early in the season part-

nered with yellow-flowered *Anemone ranunculoides* and later with the white-variegated fountains of *Molinia caerulea* 'Variegata'. For a well-drained situation, 'Dusky Rose', with its lobed, mainly purplish-red foliage, makes an appealing contrast to the slender silver leaves of *Artemisia schmidtiana* 'Nana'.

Trifolium repens 'Purpurascens Quadrifolium' (Zones 4–8, 8–1), a wine-purple, four-leaved clover with green margins, makes a ground-hugging partner for neat grasses like blue fescues or with variegated sweet flags (*Acorus* spp.) or sedges (*Carex* spp.). 'Burgundy' and 'Zinfandel' are cultivars of wood sorrel (*Oxalis vulcanicola*, Zones 9–11, 10–8), with starry yellow flowers sparkling against its purple cloverlike leaves.

Dark forms of ornamental sweet potato vine (*Ipomoea batatas*, Zones 10–11, 11–1) are popular for groundcovers and as trailers in container plantings. The leaves range from the deep black-purple of 'Blackie' to the violet-burgundy of 'Black Heart' and can be gently or deeply lobed, depending on the cultivar. These are tender plants that are usually grown as annuals in temperate regions but are perennial in Zones 10 and above.



The fine foliage of purple fennel forms a mist in this bed of red peonies and deep purple irises.

Hens-and-chicks or houseleeks (*Sempervivum* spp., Zones 4–10, 10–3) are evergreen succulents with the twin benefits of being hardy and unusually drought tolerant. The cultivar 'Jungle Shadows' has especially appealing rosettes of purple

foliage. Like all hens-and-chicks, it spreads slowly, so interplanting it with a fast-growing groundcover such as yellow variegated *Lysimachia congestiflora* 'Outback Sunset' fills the space attractively in new beds.

Other purple succulents include *Aeonium arboreum* 'Schwarzkopf' (Zones 9–11, 12–8), with its shining flat rosettes atop woody stems. It can be grown in containers and protected in a sheltered location where winters are cold. The low smoky rosettes of *Echeveria* 'Afterglow' (Zones 9–11, 12–8), with their blue tints, stand out boldly against gravel on well-drained soil or in a gravel-topped container with California poppies (*Eschscholtzia* spp.).

PURPLE BY ANY OTHER NAME

So...are the leaves of all the plants I've described truly purple? Well, some are a little more bronze, some a little more ruby, and a few—such as some of those new heucheras—come close to being the real thing. One thing is certain: They are not green. And because of this, including any of them in your borders and containers will bring a special richness to your garden. ☾

Graham Rice is the author of Planting the Dry Shade Garden (Timber Press, 2011). This is a revised and updated version of an article that previously appeared in The Gardener magazine.



Slow-growing 'Jungle Shadows' hens-and-chicks and quick-growing, yellow-flowered *Lysimachia congestiflora* pair up to make an attractive multi-textured groundcover.