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# When Leaves Come First

By Janet Loughrey, special to HGTV.com

There are few pleasures that gardeners look forward to more than the first flowers of spring. After the bloom fades, however, all that's left is the foliage. Those leaves don't need to be boring; foliage can come in an endless array of colors.

Some of the most fascinating foliage is variegated, meaning it has two or more colors. Leaves can be splashed, splattered, veined, streaked, marbled, striped or mottled. *Euphorbia characias* 'Tasmanian Tiger' has thin, creamy margins; Agave 'Spot' has irregular splotches. Those with consistent patterning in each leaf are generally more highly prized, but some such as *Houttuynia cordata* 'Chamaeleon' display an uneven mix of colors.



*Euphorbia* Tasmanian Tiger (photo courtesy of Wayside Gardens)

Plant breeders usually first notice variegation in a "sport," a mutant offshoot of a branch that is different from the original plant. The abnormal distribution of chlorophyll that creates the odd colorization can be a happy accident or the result of a virus, mineral deficiency or environmental stress. Variegation interferes with a plant's ability to photosynthesize because there's less chlorophyll in the leaves, so the resulting varieties are generally less vigorous and produce fewer blooms. Some, particularly those with white or yellow foliage, can burn if exposed to full sun or cold winds. The intensity of foliage color can vary according to the amount of sun or shade. Those with purple, yellow or brown leaves have the best coloring in full sun. White or creamy hues perform best in shade.

Not all sports are garden-worthy. Some have a tendency to "revert," or return back to their more vigorous parent. With those that exhibit occasional reversion, the green leaves or branches can simply be trimmed out to prevent the entire plant from turning back to green.



*Polemonium* 'Stairway to Heaven' (photo courtesy of Terra Nova Nurseries)

Breeders do their best to make sure new cultivars will perform well for gardeners. They also look for ways to improve existing varieties. In the mid 1990s, variegated Jacob's ladder (*Polemonium caeruleum* 'Brise D' Anjou') was introduced with great fanfare. The lacy creme-and-green striped foliage topped with pale blue flowers was an instant hit. However, 'Brise D' Anjou' didn't do as well in regions with hot, humid summers. A recent introduction of variegated Jacob's ladder (*Polemonium reptans* 'Stairway to Heaven') is more vigorous and heat-tolerant.

Shrubs are generally versatile and easy to grow, and weigelas are among the most reliable in the garden. A familiar standby is *W. florida* 'Variegata', with broad yellow leaf margins and pale pink flowers in spring. 'My Monet' offers a striking mix of pink, green and cream foliage and bright pink flowers in spring. This dwarf beauty (12 to 18 inches tall and 24 inches wide) is effective in mass plantings, at the edge of a border or in a container.



'My Monet' weigela (photo courtesy of Wayside Gardens)

Recent introductions of mophead hydrangeas such as 'Endless Summer' bloom on new wood, a breakthrough for colder climates where these popular shrubs die back to the ground in winter. *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Light O Day' (syn. 'Baillpse') has a crisp white edge on the leaves. This improved

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'Light O Day' hydrangea  
(photo courtesy of Bailey Nurseries)

variety blooms reliably on new wood and is hardier than other variegated forms. The lacecap flowers come in hues of pink or blue surrounded by bright white petals. 'Light O Day' performs best in dappled shade

Woody and herbaceous perennials come in a wide selection of variegated forms, from reliable long bloomers to stately ornamental grasses and tidy groundcovers.

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Some of the most striking variegations are the horizontal stripes found on ornamental grasses such as *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Zebrinus.' Recent introductions include *M. sinensis* 'Gold Bar', with bands of gold and green, and *M. sinensis* 'Super Stripe', which has wide margins of pale white and forest green. These reliable perennials offer color into late fall long after most flowers are gone.

Variegated groundcovers are a great solution for lightening up a shady area. Gardeners in cold climates benefit from the many sturdy forms of spotted deadnettle including 'Pink Pewter' (*Lamium maculatum*) and bugleweed (*Ajuga reptans*) 'Burgundy Glow', which are hardy to USDA Zone 3. Gardeners in milder climates (USDA Zones 7-10) can grow Asian jasmine 'First Snow' (syn. *Trachelospermum asiaticum* 'Snow 'n Summer'), with pink and white new growth fading to hues of marbled cream and green. The trailing habit is also attractive on a trellis or in a container.

Gardeners prize hibiscus for the flamboyant flowers that appear in mid- to late summer, but some varieties are also noted for foliage. One of the most versatile is 'Red Shield' (*H. acetosella*), which has an upright bushy habit and deep maroon foliage. New in 2007, the aptly named 'Haight Ashbury' has deeply lobed leaves in a kaleidoscope of white, pink, green and burgundy hues. These hibiscus are grown as annuals in most areas and are effective in containers or mixed borders.

Begonias are nearly unrivaled in their popularity as houseplants and conservatory specimens, and for good reason. The rhizomatous types are easy to grow, and the foliage is often whorled, veined and patterned. When the weather warms in spring, these indoor plants perform double-duty in the garden as accent or container plants, and in warmer climates as bedding plants. The frosty, deeply lobed foliage of 'Benitochiba' is infused with rich burgundy tones and green veining. 'Cathedral' has ruffled leaves of green on top and an underside of deep red accented with green, suggestive of stained-glass windows.

Kitchen gardens are no stranger to bicolor or multicolor herbs such as pineapple mint (*Mentha suaveolens* 'Variegata') and 'Tricolor' sage (*Salvia officinalis*). The first variegated basil is sure to win rave reviews with edible and ornamental gardeners alike. The foliage of 'Pesto Perpetual' (*Ocimum x citriodorum*) is edged with a wide margin of creamy white. The upright columnar habit and generous height (to four feet tall) make this a striking focal point. This variety doesn't flower, so it keeps its aroma and flavor all season



*Miscanthus* 'Super Stripe' (photo courtesy of Blooms of Bressingham)



*Trachelospermum* 'First Snow' (photo courtesy of Wayside Gardens)



'Haight Ashbury' (photo courtesy of EuroAmerican)



*Begonia* 'Benitochiba' (photo courtesy of Terra Nova Nurseries)

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long.

### Designing a garden with variegated plants

- Use variegated plants sparingly in the garden. Because many patterns are quite bold and striking, they can be most effective in combination with more subdued plants that are complementary. The intense yellow and green of *Euonymus fortunei* 'Emerald n' Gold' has more visual impact when paired with the saffron flowers of cinquefoil (*Potentilla aurea*). Think of pairing the groundcover bugleweed (*Ajuga reptans* 'Multicolor'), the metallic burgundy-green leaves suffused in cream and pink, beneath the rich purple canopy of smoke tree (*Cotinus coggygria* 'Royal Purple') for a dazzling effect in a mixed border.



'Cathedral' (photo courtesy of Terra Nova Nurseries)



'Pesto Perpetual' basil (photo courtesy of Sunny Border Nurseries)

- Take advantage of the multiple roles that variegated plants can play in the garden. Patterned foliage creates the sensation of **movement**, adding a new dimension of depth and a sense of complexity. Shade-tolerant varieties can be used to **lighten** dark areas. Bold-leaved forms provide a **dramatic focal point** in a mixed border. Trailing vines such as periwinkle (*Vinca minor*) 'Illumination' make an attractive **accent** for containers. Extremely colorful foliage such as 'Kong' coleus looks best when standing alone or surrounded with neutral hues of green or gray.

There's a variegated plant for every garden, whether an expansive mixed border, small courtyard, balcony or a single container. From supporting role to radiant star, these patterned plants add an unforgettable touch to any garden space.

— Janet Loughrey is a horticulture photographer and writer who lives and gardens in Portland, Oregon. Her work has appeared in *Sunset*, *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Country Living* Gardener. Her book *Gardens Adirondack Style* was published in 2005 by *Down East Books*.

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