



Home trends

Add color to your life with annuals and perennials

By Kathryn Kingsbury

Sometimes gardening feels more like science than art. With each plant you put in, there are soil and sun requirements, watering schedules and pruning needs to keep track of. But it's nice when you can put all those concerns aside for just a minute and think about the ultimate goal of having all these plants around: beauty.

Playing around with color in your yard and garden is a wonderful way to develop your aesthetic sensibilities. We consulted three local gardening experts for insights into using color in the garden.

Wendy Split, a horticulturist at Olbrich Botanical Gardens in Madison, says an easy way to think about color combinations is to divide the rainbow into two categories: hot and cool. Hot colors are oranges, yellows and true reds. Cool colors lean toward the blue end of the spectrum and include most blues, purples, whites, pinks and deep reds. Choosing to plant only hot or only cool colors is a fool-proof method for avoiding chromatic clashes in your flower bed.

In gardening, we often think of green as neutral, but even leaves can lean toward hot or cool. Lime and yellowish greens fall squarely within a hot color scheme, while the so-called "blue" hostas are perfect choices for the cool garden.

You can choose to narrow your palette even further, as early-twentieth century writer Vita Sackville-West did famously in her White Garden in Sissinghurst, England. "My personal philosophy is yes, there can be too much color," says Colleen Garrigan, co-owner of Northwind

Perennial Farm in Burlington. "For myself, I like to keep the same colors together. I find that ... much more calming and peaceful."

Garrigan recommends basing your garden on perennials, which come back year after year but are in bloom for only a few days to a few weeks each season. Select plants with an eye for different bloom times so that, once you put them in, something is always in flower. Then plant a few annuals, which last only one summer but bloom for months on end, to add consistency to the color scheme. "The perennials should be the bones of the garden, and the annuals make little splashes of color," says Garrigan.

And don't forget the shrubs, adds Split. Spring-flowering shrubs like forsythia burst forth in color when the rest of the garden is still a drab brown, and the leaves of shrubs like fothergilla and sumac turn fiery reds and oranges in fall.

Thankfully, color is one of those aspects of gardening where there really are no cut-and-dry rules. If you like it, it works. "Some people really like monochromatic gardens," says Rick Halbach, greenhouse worker at Klein's Floral and Greenhouse in Madison, "and I like every color in the rainbow — really splashy and flashy."

Here are some plant varieties that our experts recommend for reliable and unusual colors:

- **Milkweed** (*Aesclepias*) — Halbach recommends mixing perennial milkweeds with annual ones for continual color and an ongoing attraction to butterflies. Try the native orange butterfly weed (*A. tuberosa*) or a cultivated variety like 'Hello Yellow' as

How to choose the perfect plant

By Jane Kuzma

When shopping for flowering perennials or annuals, make sure the plants you choose meet these requirements:

- Leaves are deep green (unless variegated or colored varieties)
- Leaves do not have insect holes or disease spots
- Most varieties of plants have several to many stems
- Annuals have many flower buds or new flowers
- Leaves and flower buds are not dried out
- Plant roots are moist and the soil has not pulled away from the pot.
- Roots fill the pot, but are not crowded
- The variety (or cultivar) does not require special treatment, unless you know how, or want, to take care of it.
- Perennials that are winter hardy to Zone 4

Jane Kuzma owns Bur Oak Designs, Inc., a landscape design office in Madison.

your perennial, then throw in some tropical milkweed (*A. curassavica*) for its all-season symphony of orange, red and yellow.

- **Joe Pye weed** (*Eupatorium*) — Members of this native plant genus range in height from two to six feet and feature pink or purple flowers and stems tinged with varying degrees of purple. Spotted Joe Pye weed (*E. maculatum*) has the most purple of any of the wild species, but plant breeders have developed many cultivated varieties, such as *E. rugosum* 'Chocolate,' with even stronger foliage color.
- **Wild geranium**, or crane's bill (*Geranium maculatum*) — Split loves this low-growing Wisconsin native for its pink-to-purple spring flowers and its bright green foliage that turns a deep red in the fall.
- **Sweet potato vine** (*Ipomoea batatas*) — This annual vine comes in a plethora of leaf colors, from lime green to near-black. *I. batatas* 'Tricolor' is a stunning amalgam of green, bright purple, and white.
- **Penstemon 'Husker Red'** (*Penstemon digitalis*) — Garrigan recommends this perennial for its burgundy-tinged foliage and white, tubular flowers that run up the stem and stay in bloom for several weeks in early summer.
- **Coleus** (*Solenostemon scutellarioides*) — Coleus, which are native to the tropics and are treated as annuals in Wisconsin, have been bred since Victorian times for bold and surprising leaf pigments that range from yellow to purple to red. With leaves like that, who needs to wait for flowers? Most thrive in full sun to partial shade. Garrigan recommends Big Red, a cultivar with lipstick-red leaves edged in pale yellow; Sun Inky Fingers, a sun-loving coleus blotted with deep burgundy; Lemon and Lime, which is streaked with green and bright yellow; and Jack of Diamonds, a purple variety mottled with pink spots.



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