



# The Power of Purple

When I walk through most gardens the predominant color is green. As one often immersed in the garden as weeder, deadheader or planter, chlorophyll has a tendency to color my

world that way. Green has stage presence. In fact, for most flowers, it is the stage on which they perform. Green seems to work with almost any other color in the garden.

But is there another color that can work its color magic throughout the garden with the cools of blues and whites and the hots of reds and oranges? Yes, Virginia, there is, and that color is purple! It is a power player in my garden. And no wonder, the color of kings is a heady mix in varying proportions (there are red purples, and blue purples as well as, well, purple purple) of red and blue. Mix the hot color red, with the cool color blue, and voila, a color that runs hot and coooold!

There are many plants in terra flora that tout purple flowers. Not only that, but there are plants with purple stems and purple foliage, purple berries and even some with purple cones! Whether your purple is on stem or leaf, a weaver through other plants or one that stands alone in a crowd, the power of purple can serve many purposes, from a visual point of reference to a pleasing link between hot colors and cold. Let's look at a few power players that should be in our gardens and how they grow.

Story and photos by Scott Burrell

▲ The use of various foliage colors in addition to flower diversity, keeps the spring to fall garden incredibly interesting. Purple and yellow foliage in addition to green, are essential ingredients to a garden with all-seasons interest. Try the colored evergreen foliage of dwarf conifers such as dwarf Colorado blue spruce 'St. Mary' with blue foliage or the golden yellow of *Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Crippsii' for pronounced winter interest.

**A**s the foundation from which most great gardens spring, trees and shrubs are well represented by purple. Many of us think of purple leaf plum (*Prunus cerasifera* 'Thundercloud') a common denizen of the suburban landscape. And many gardeners marvel at the beauty of the purple-leaved cutleaf Japanese maple – *Acer palmatum dissectum* cultivars such as 'Crimson Queen', 'Red Dragon', 'Orangeola' and 'Red Select' are but a few of a number of cascading forms.

But people coming to my garden in early May are stunned when they look up to see the red-purple wisteria-like flowers of the 30' purple locust tree, *Robinia x ambigua* 'Purple Robe'. Given a couple of years of staking, normal even poor (but not poorly drained) garden soil, and a forgiving attitude for some branch breakage, this tree casts a light summer shade under which can be planted a host of companions – from the true hardy perennial geraniums (*Geranium cantabrigiense* 'Karmina', *G. x 'Rozanne'* and *G. sanguineum* 'Tiny Monster' are good purple/magenta flowered ground cover types) to creeping raspberry (*Rubus calcyniodes*), one of the purple-foliaged coral bells (*Heuchera* 'Obsidian' for example) or miniature bulbs such as *Narcissus* 'Chit Chat', a 10" tall dwarf daffodil.

Not far away from it is another unusual purple-foliaged tree, the mimosa cultivar 'Summer Chocolate' (*Albizia julibrissin*). Discovered in Japan in 1990 as a seedling, it can easily grow to 4' a year. Though tolerant of part shade, the darkest leaf color will be achieved in full sun. At our garden we took the time to train it into a single stemmed tree by cutting off side branches while training one stem up a 10' bamboo stake driven into the ground. The long arching branches sport deep purple leaves in fan-like wands on which rest pink feathered flowerheads in midsummer. And the leaf color does not fade or bronze out in our hot humid climate.



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**Above right: This native spring bloomer is the smallest (to 20") of this incredible genus. They are very long lived (but resent root disturbance), good substitutes to achieve the "lupine" look, drought tolerant once established and come in colors ranging from shades of purple to yellow, to white. Others to try: *Baptisia* x 'Carolina Moonlight' with soft yellow flowers, *Baptisia* x 'Chocolate Chips' with yellow and brown purple bicolor flowers, *Baptisia* x 'Purple Smoke'.**

**Opposite page top: Some purple foliage plants (the redbud 'Forest Pansy' being a good example) can bronze or fade through the summer months, so I am always on the lookout for those like *C.* 'Velvet Cloak' that hold fast to good clean purple color all summer long.**

**Opposite page middle: Purple pineapple lily emerging in the spring garden. Slow to come up, it usually emerges in mid to late April. Seen here with the golden spiderwort 'Sweet Kate'.**

**Opposite page bottom: A nice mounding and spreading evergreen true geranium, There are many very fine true perennial geraniums. One of the best purple foliaged forms is *G. pratense* 'Dark Reiter' sporting deep blue-lilac flowers.**

For Beth and I, some large shrubs/small trees are best kept under control so one can keep their tendency toward ranginess inbound not outbound. *Cotinus coggygia* 'Velvet Cloak', or smoketree, is such a one. It's wonderful spoon-shaped, red-toned purple leaves burst out each spring from woody stems we cut back to the ground in late winter to keep the shrub in the 4-6' range rather than what could be an overwhelming 15' mass. This substantial body of dark leaves acts more as a large scale perennial than a shrub and really accentuates the vertical spears of Siberian Iris (*Iris siberica*) 'Chilled Wine' which sports blue flowers blending to wine purple in late spring. The bright yellow mounded shape of gold spirea (*Spiraea japonica* 'Goldmound') next door is accentuated and contrasted against this dark background. It reminds me that to the eye, dark purple foliage color creates a sense of shade even in the sunlight while bright yellow foliage creates a sense of sunny brightness even when the sun is not out. Cool huh? And a large purple mass of foliage, like a large mass of yellow defines the space and the plants around it. Round green plants show off their "roundness" and interesting textures such as the large, rough leaves of the oakleaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia* 'Alice' is a particularly nice cultivar) are accentuated and their unique shapes "pulle" out of the otherwise blending sea of green.

Everyone loves a good clematis, and there are a lot of good clematis including purple bloomers that can stand alone or be used to weave through the branches of other garden plants. Clematis 'Roguchi' (*Clematis integrifolia* x *durandii*), a relatively new selection, is one of the finest bell-shaped clematis ever introduced. Its all-summer blooms are a saturated blue-purple on vigorous purple-black stems—fantastic! Another worth noting for its large, open faced blue and purple/lavender streaked flowers is clematis 'Tie Dye'. The cultivar name fits the unusual streaking from flower center to petal edge. Like virtually all clematis, soil prep is a must with 30 % organic matter and a loose soil dug and improved to 18" depth essential to long term vigorous growth.

One of the shocking and stunning plants in our summer garden is an annu-

### CATALOG SOURCES FOR PLANTS:

**Plant Delights Nursery** (good selection of *Baptisia* among a host of interesting tropicals & others.

**Garden Crossings** – *Clematis* 'Roguchi' and a host of others.

**Forest Farm** – Incredible offering of woodies, perennials, vines and fruits

**Brent and Becky's Bulbs** – ornamental onions, Peruvian Hyacinth and other worthwhile bulbs

**Sunlight Gardens** – Great range of natives and including our native phloxes, and a host of other worthwhile native and exotic woody and perennial cultivars such as the purple leaved 'Husker Red' Beard-Tongue (*Penstemon digitalis* 'Husker Red').

*The Power of Purple*



◆ **Verbena 'Homestead'** grows around our bee hive with pink Knock Out rose in the background.

A probably cross of our black locust with another native, the pink flowered *Robinia hispida*. The result red-purple racemes of pea like flowers dependably every year. ◆



◆ The Japanese culteaf maple will take many years to achieve a 10' mature height. Newer cultivars can maintain the rich purple color even in full sun. Shown here with the gold ring barberry (*Berberis thunbergii* 'Gold Ring'). Purple masses redefine the look of a garden and break the monotony of too much green.

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al cuphea, *Cuphea llavea* 'Bat Wings'. Many of the tropicals (most of the garden cupheas including the perennial purple flowered *C. glutinosa* are from Mexico) sport intensely colored flowers but the firecracker plant's grape purple "body" topped with two scarlet petals or "wings" is so vivid it pops! Give it average to rich soil but don't over fertilize as this will add foliage at the expense of flower. This 12" tall plant matches up well with the bold purple to red and cream striped foliage of the canna lily cultivar 'Tropicana' (syn. *C. 'Phaison'*) or the deep royal purple blooms of the tender 4' perennial salvia *Salvia* x 'Purple Majesty'.

I like bold foliage. The 3' long flat purple elephant ear leaves on 5' stalks, of *Colocasia* 'Black Magic' (taro, elephant ears) are worth every penny it costs to buy one (one plant will cover 20 square feet by summer's end where happy). It may not be hardy, but man does it make an all summer "look-at-me" statement. Like many of the tropicals it is a heavy feeder, and not too drought tolerant, so give it lots of organic matter and enough water to keep it happy.

Also bold but much shorter, and perennial, is the purple pineapple lily (*Eucomis comosa* 'Sparkling Burgundy') A South African native that forms a 24" wide rosette of deep purple straplike leaves from which rise in mid summer a 20" high pineapple-looking bloom stalk. Wow! Put it with the golden spiderwort (*Tradescantia* x 'Sweet Kate') for real eye-popping contrast or be a bit more subtle and allow the purple flowers of the Serbian bellflower (*Campanula poscharskyana*) to lean up through it.

From ornamental onions with flowerheads the size of softballs (*Allium* 'Globemaster') to purple compact versions of our own native plants such as ninebark (*Physocarpus opulifolius* 'Summer Wine') to the bright purple emerging cones of the superdwarf Norway spruce, *Picea abies* 'Pusch', the world is awash in purple and thank goodness for that! More power to purple! ♪

Scott Burrell is a ...