

Armchair Gardener: Dreaming of Color

Get ahead during the winter off-season

I. Garden dreams become plans, November to March

- A. Ever-expanding gardens can overwhelm us during the season
- B. Some beds cry out for help
 - 1. Lackluster areas
 - 2. Overgrown sections
 - 3. A few that were chaos since inception
 - 4. A distracting racket of distress calls fill the gardener's ear
- C. It's easiest to give undivided attention while troubled plants are at rest
 - 1. Beds look neat then - they don't change daily and press the issue
 - 2. Pests are also at rest, so no crises develop behind our backs
 - 3. Many resources at hand: books, magazines, classes, designing friends with spare time

II. Here's the simple process to make the dreams real:

- A. Sketch an outline of the bed
 - 1. "To scale" not necessary, at least at first
 - 2. This should be an outline only - no plants!
- B. Redefine the bed as needed
 - 1. To resize for significant impact
 - Length or width = 1/2 distance to main viewer
 - Area/s apparently equal to other landscape elements
 - 2. To change the feeling
 - a. Make long axis intercept main viewer's gaze, near 90° angle
 - b. Straight edges tend to formal - require crisp, no-nonsense planting
 - c. Curves are more relaxed, but can be overdone
 - 3. Making do without a scale drawing
 - a. For outlines, hoses don't work in the cold
 - b. Nylon rope or cloth tape measure do serve
 - c. New edge can be recorded as "gradual bow, to 3' wider directly south of crabapple trunk," etc.
- C. Inventory your plants and garden features (non-plant elements)
 - 1. A list, not locations. Nothing is permanent, all can be moved!
 - 2. No concern over quantities
 - 3. Name it as you call it - no formality needed
 - 4. Color is not of major concern

- D. Reduce the list to true gems and good friends only
1. The enduring presences that shine in winter's memory
 - a. True gems
 - beautiful in flower
 - fine form, leaf color or texture the remainder of the season
 - b. Good friends
 - Thrilling in bloom
 - Step quickly into the shadows when not
 - Foliage neither spectacular nor shabby
 2. Take your chance - in dormancy the rejected can't plead or persuade
 3. Profile of a condemned plant:
 - a. Untreatable shabbiness. At some point in the season it:
 - Slouches
 - Pales
 - Tatters
 - Or hides
 - No matter that someone else could reform it. It's shown its true colors under your care and environment
 - b. Over-willing, vigorous types that tangle up into their neighbors
 - Once loved precisely for their vigor
 - Sneak thieves that spread by underground runners
 - Sprawlers that lodge on and smother other plants
 - Prolific self-sowers
 - c. Boring plants
 - Do their job but don't put any spirit into it
 - You may notice flowers but don't come out just to see them
 - Foliage and bearing have no meritorious distinction

E. Arrange the "keepers"

1. One at a time, select a place for each true gem species
 - a. Position it to be seen from one or more important vantage points
 - b. May need to buy or divide to fill significant space with each species
2. True gems should be flanked by good friends
 - a. To complement the gem's bloom
 - b. Or to bring color to the area when the gem isn't blooming
 - c. Or to contrast the gem's foliage color, shape or texture

3. Combine 3 to 5 species, then move to another spot for a gem and friends
 - a. Settle complementary groups down at strategic spots in the outline
 - Place three or more groups
 - Relative locations of groups should form a pleasing pattern; to lead the eye through the garden
 - Center vs. off-center placement relates to formal vs. informal lines
 - b. Leave space - beautiful in its own right or to-be-filled later
- F. Recruit replacements
1. From high-caliber replacements with references
 - a. Books
 - b. Classes
 - c. Friends
 2. Risky - let "the best" of the rejects stay until the new plants arrive
- G. Think "peak bloom" when dreaming of color changes and additions
1. Many perennials, vines and shrubs have extended bloom seasons
 2. Yet all have a week or two of glorious peak bloom
 3. Map out the blooming schedule for the existing bed, and fill the gaps with plants that peak at those crucial times.
- H. Make your moves in earliest spring - April 1
1. Best use of off-season energy is in making decisions
 2. Early spring garden work best for our physical tone, summer returns
 3. Execute the orders *before* any endearing green shoots emerge!
 4. Move the rejects out as undifferentiated clumps of soil
 - a. Best to just compost them
 - b. Or, a beginning (unsuspecting) gardener may appreciate
 - c. Plant swaps are consolation to those who can't compost

III. Some plants to think about:

red baneberry - *Actaea rubra*
(curly leaf) allium - *Allium senescens glaucum*
blue star / amsonia - *Amsonia tabernaemontana*
goatsbeard - *Aruncus dioicus*; teamed up with:
Siberian iris - *Iris sibirica*
variegated iris - *Iris pallida* 'Aureo-variegata' & *Iris p.* 'Argenteo-variegata'
astilbe - dwarf, late *Astilbe chinensis*
masterwort / astrantia - *Astrantia carniolica* (*Astrantia major rubra* OK) & *Astrantia major*
false rock cress - *Aubrieta deltoidea*
baptisia / false indigo - *Baptisia australis*
clustered bellflower - *Campanula glomerata*
Coreopsis 'Goldfink' - *Coreopsis auriculata* 'Goldfink'
blue oat grass - *Helictotrichon sempervirens*
lenten rose - *Helleborus x orientalis*
coral bells - *Heuchera* hybrids - H. 'Palace Purple' & H. 'Pewter Veil'
Gold Standard hosta - *Hosta* 'Gold Standard'
maiden grass - *Miscanthus sinensis*, all varieties
Solomon's seal - *Polygonatum biflorum*
variegated Solomon's seal - *Polygonatum odoratum variegatum*
Bethlehem sage / lungwort - *Pulmonaria saccharata* & *P. longifolia*
American cranberry viburnum - *Viburnum trilobum*
seven son shrub - *Heptacodium miconioides*
panicle hydrangea, especially late blooming 'Tardiva,' or not-early, not-double type such as 'Pink Diamond' or 'White Lady'
pasqueflower - *Anemone pulsatilla* A.K.A. *Pulsatilla vulgaris*
Japanese painted fern - *Athyrium goeringianum* 'Pictum' teamed up with *Virginia*
bluebells - *Mertensia virginica*
variegated lilyturf - *Liriope spicata* 'variegata' and other varieties