

## Old-Fashioned Summer Perennials

By Susan Camp

Around this time every year, I grow nostalgic for last summer's flowers. I wait anxiously to see what made it through the winter, and I think about what to plant as replacements in case some of the plants didn't survive the cold.

As much as I love to look at new cultivars and hybrids in the garden catalogs, I confess to a special fondness for old-fashioned garden plants, the ones now known as heritage or heirloom plants or "passalong" plants, because they are the ones people traditionally have shared with family members and friends. Some passalong plants travel hundreds of miles over the years, and many were brought to North America from Europe and Asia.

One of my long-time favorites is obedient plant (*Physostegia virginiana*), also called false dragonhead. Obedient plant takes its common name from the tendency of the stalks to remain in any position they are placed. A native perennial, obedient plant grows in average, moist, well-drained, acidic soil. The double-lipped, white or pale pink to lilac flowers bloom from midsummer to early fall on 3 to 4-foot square stems. Flowers open from the bottom of each stalk, which carries toothed, lance-shaped leaves. Plants spread by rhizomes or from seed. The common name of false dragonhead refers to the flowers' resemblance to dragonhead (*Dracocephalum*). My patch of *P. virginiana* was given to me by a friend in Newport News when we first moved to Gloucester.

The same friend gave me a clump of *Oxalis violacea*, or violet wood sorrel, a dainty native that blooms in May with five-petaled blossoms of white, pink, lavender, or violet. The clover-like leaves each have three heart-shaped leaflets. *Oxalis* prefers average, well-drained, acidic soil in full sun to part shade. The bulbs should be planted in the fall. *Oxalis* will spread by rhizomes growing from the bulb to form new clumps. *Oxalis* looks pretty planted at the front of a border in a cottage garden setting. It is a hardy rock garden plant that will last for many years.

Common yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) was introduced to North America from Europe and Asia during the early Colonial period. Long valued as a medicinal herb to stop bleeding, yarrow is hardy and can be aggressive. It thrives in full sun in poor, dry, well-drained, sandy soils and tolerates drought and deer. Yarrow spreads by rhizomes to form mats or clumps that should be divided every two to three years. It grows 2 to 3 feet tall with a similar size spread. Yarrow withstands cutting back at intervals to keep the size in check or to harvest the flowers, which dry well. The feathery, finely cut foliage is a soft gray-green. Three-inch wide flat flower clusters appear on long stalks between June and September. The species plant bears white, cream, or pink flowers.

The name of the red cultivar in the photo is unknown, because I bought it from a local nursery as a last-season, unnamed plant. This is a good way to save money if you aren't fussy about knowing identities. Sometimes you get a nice surprise.

The red yarrow and yellow coreopsis present a cheerful combination for sunny summer days. *Coreopsis verticillata* 'Moonbeam', sometimes called threadleaf coreopsis for its fine foliage, is a

popular addition to borders and wildflower gardens. The cultivar 'Moonbeam' grows in dry, well-drained sandy or rocky soil in full sun, blooming profusely from late spring to late summer. The creamy yellow, daisy-like flowers seem to float on the delicate foliage. More compact than the species plant, 'Moonbeam' grows 1 ½ to 2 feet tall with a spread of similar size. 'Moonbeam' will rebloom in fall if plants are sheared after the midsummer bloom.

All four plants are perennials with no serious insect pests or diseases. Whether you call them heirloom, heritage, or passalong plants, they will be faithful garden inhabitants, popping up year after year. The Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder contains entries for many native and exotic plants.

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