

Bright Blue October

With the promise of less humid air and bright blue skies, October is doubly welcome after a long season of debilitating humidity. Wonderful planting weather has arrived!

First, look around and see what has done so well that you may want additions to your collections. On my over-weedy village lot, the toad lilies are blooming for the first time in years. They are usually deer food long before bloom season. Mine are not special, an ordinary *Tricyrtis hirta*, but the long tapering leaves extend neatly from the stem along a partly shady walk making an easy ground cover.

The flowers are about the size of a quarter and emerge in the leaf axils along the stem. They are pale in color but are curiously marked in maroon speckles and the pistils, stamens and such sit up to be noticed. Very distinctive!

Grasses are another October delight. They are probably an acquired taste. Years ago I tried a large, very large pennisetum: couldn't get rid of it fast enough. I do love the smaller ones of any species such as the miscanthus 'Morning Light' and the pink muhly grass which does wait until October to turn a lovely soft pink and catch the morning dew.

Asters are fall bloomers, some even waiting until early November to flower. Some are lovely blowing around the stems of the last reluctant roses. Only in the catalogs do asters hold their heads up and smile for the camera. In gardens, especially after a rainy spell, they sprawl. Their glorious crimsons and lavender blues make them welcome, regardless of their posture.

Chrysanthemums are longtime favorites and the garden mums that fill nurseries now will grace your Thanksgiving table, perhaps even into December if a killing frost is behind schedule. Those fat, happy mounds of color are perennial but have a poor record for coming back. Perfect drainage may make their return more likely but it may be enough to enjoy their beauty week after week and ignore next year.

Another lovely fall plant is the sumac. It suffers from the fact that it grows like a weed in many areas, blazing along narrow country roads, so why should it be treasured? And then, there is that label, "poison sumac". Finally the time has come for sumacs to be appreciated! The very prestigious Longwood Gardens, near Kennett Square, Pa. has been concentrating on this plant and they have listed several that are special.

A top choice is *Rhus typhina* cultivar 'Dissecta'. It can become a small tree but its large compound leaves turn a brilliant red in fall. It earns its space in the border in spring as well, with panicles of yellow/green flowers. Longwood Gardens is also promoting a fragrant sumac, *R. aromatica* which stays small enough so the fragrance is nose level – 3 to 6 feet.

This species has lost its country casualness and been citified for small gardens. For example there is 'Gro-low' with yellow spring flowers and a usable two feet in height. A member of the family that dates to 1863, a *laciniata* cultivar of the smooth sumac, *Rhus glabra* is outstanding for its foliage, flower, and fall color as well as its attraction to bees and butterflies. If you look around your property you may find a few sumacs, bird gifts. They can be moved to a hedgerow and enjoyed, now that they have status.

A shrub that has been resurrected from a past of neglect is the snow wreath. This little known plant is a native of Alabama, known horticulturally as *Neviusia alabamensis*. Both Fairweather Gardens and Forest Farms catalogs list it. We may wonder why it is native to Alabama and not found further north when it is hardy to zone ?. I have read that it is millions of years old and that makes me wonder why it is not in the giant AHS A-Z Encyclopedia of Garden Plants? The Fairweather catalog says it is easy to grow, and closely related to *Kerria*, (native to China and Japan). What makes the flowers noteworthy is that rather than having petals, they have a wealth of fluffy white stamens so the shrub is arresting in its early spring bloom. It is multi-stemmed and upright to 4 to 6 feet and is happy in full sun in all but very dry soils.

In our area full sun is not essential as it grows well in shade. The new stems may be kept cut if you don't want it to spread. Another plus: both the Arnold Arboretum and the Morton Arboretum report that this native is deer-proof. The deer in Virginia may be less fussy and hungrier than those in Massachusetts or Illinois, but how grand if it were so. You can see where it would make a great deer-detering hedge, can't you? In addition, after pruning this deciduous hedge, it blooms even more profusely the following year.