

## Not Dark, But Tall and Handsome

You know those spaces between your lawn and a small wood or a fence, field, hedge, or even the side of your garage? They can be an eyesore at worst and boring at best, but they can also be a chance to add color and height, to pull your eye away from the heat-flattened rest of your garden.

Some plants, even in the foreground, can be tall without obscuring what is beyond them. *Gaura* and *Verbena bonariensis* have see-through charm and movement. They self-seed; *gaura* more reliably than the *verbena*. I used to have those tall wands of purple *verbena* here and there but this year they have limited their efforts to the seams in the driveway, surrounded by fat grass cushions. This may prove they prefer hot, dry, impossible locations. The driveway will be weeded and the *verbena* moved the first day the high is in the seventies.

Neither of these tall plants have the mass you need to create a tall background in perennials to get your border off its knees. Grasses do wonders, beginning to bloom late August adding more dancing height but their colors are delicate. For more arresting color try *Veronicastrum*. This Virginia native, often called Culver's root, has white blooms like candles on an altar and midgreen foliage like an open hand. It comes in other colors, pinkish or blueish but the white is brightest. Other species are also available in deeper colors from catalogs but the *V. virginicum* is sure to thrive here.

I have just one and I don't deserve to have it as it has been nearly shaded into extinction. I may move it to a sunnier spot, near the purple blooming New York ironweed that this year is about four feet high instead of its usual seven. I did cut it back in June and was pleased that it didn't retaliate by refusing to bloom. There is a joe-pye weed near it, a volunteer so it is a washed out pink not the prettier colors of the hybridized cultivars.

Another back-of-the-border favorite is *Verbascum* with wooly grey foliage and small pale yellow flowers opening in its upper regions. These plants are related to the stately mulleins that stand erect along the highways, undiscouraged by their lack of welcome. *V. silver candelabra* has silver-white leaves that rise to 5-7 feet and a similar one, *V. olympicum* is about 6 feet tall but slower to flower and often dies after flowering. Not all *verbascums* have yellow flowers; *V. phoeniceum*, purple mullein, may be white, pink, violet or dark purple contrasting richly with dark green wrinkly leaves. These cultivars can behave like biennials and can be short lived but can also naturalize when they like the site. They prefer poor soil well drained and slightly limey.

If deep pink trusses are what your garden needs, try planting *Filipendula palmata* 'Rubra'. You may find it listed under Siberian meadowsweet. The native one, *F. rubra* is called queen of the meadow. In the right spot these can stretch to six feet or more and will grow in part shade or even in a damp spot. They also bloom all summer.

Tall, dependable, heat-defying is garden phlox. The shorter sorts are currently more fashionable but if you want bright heads at a distance, these plants will provide it. There is surely

a phlox to every purpose under heaven from ground covers, low growing, front of the border varieties and tall *P. paniculata*. This last one is drought proof and continues to flower for weeks if deadheaded and although the heights are given as 3 to 4 feet they are usually taller here.

Unkempt though your garden may be due to holidays and heat, there are survivors to admire. The beautyberry, *Callicarpa americana*, is showing its small glowing purple berries in the leaf axils and the tawny and golden sumac is suggesting that autumn may arrive, at least in the calendar. These plants, *Rhus* by name, should not be shunned just because you probably did not plant them. The slender leaves turn wondrous shades in fall. Our native sumacs are not the species that have the toxic qualities that give rise to rashes or other skin problems: those are *R. verniciflua*, the varnish tree, and *R. succedanea*, foreigners all.

One of the natives, the staghorn or velvet sumac, *R. typhina*, may be invasive because it suckers. Those red velvety shoots that resemble a stag's horn give it the name.

These late summer days are a good time to 'houseclean' your garden design by tossing the poor sports and giving more space to those plants that coped with heat, drought, and neglect.