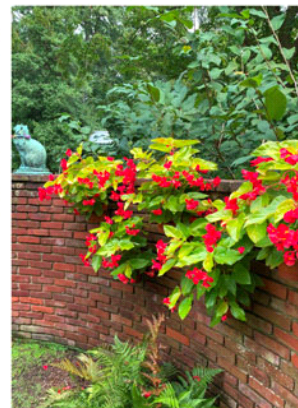


Features

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Let's Talk About That Foliage

Andrew Bunting



I've always felt that plants with outstanding foliage, whether it be in the garden or in a container, play an integral role in the aesthetic success of the planting. While flowering plants will come and go, plants with beautiful foliage "hold" the design together throughout the season.

There are many fantastic perennials with outstanding foliage, including thousands of selections of hostas, both native and exotic ferns, amazing choices of hellebores, and many other plants with variegated, colored and dissected foliage. In addition to using perennials in the garden, I like to augment the perennial garden and my container gardens with annuals and tropicals with great foliage. For container gardening, I like to use the "rule of thumb" that 50% of the plants in the container should have great foliage.

Pictured: Inferno Coleus, Canary Wing Begonia and Ensete ventricosum Maurelii, Maui Gold Colocasia and Pennisetum setaceum Rubrum.

Begonias have experienced an amazing renaissance. Begonia Canary Wing is taking the country by storm. Not only is this an amazing selection with a profusion of soft pink flowers that has "flower power" from May all the way through to frost, but it also has amazing bright yellow foliage that ultimately fades to a chartreuse. Like many begonias, it will thrive best in part shade to shade. It's great in window boxes, containers and hanging baskets, as well as added to the perennial garden to add "pops" of color, or simply used in bold annual and tropical plants for the summer.

More Showstoppers

The Jurassic and Jurassic Jr. series are Rex begonias. These tight-growing begonias are also great for accents in the garden where a clump of highly decorative foliage is needed. They're perfect as a single specimen in a container

or used in container mixes and window boxes. Watermelon has a striking blend of silver, purple and green variegation. Cherry Spike has a burgundy-black edge to the leaf with silver-veined leaves in the center. Silver Point is another selection with great pewter silver coloring.

Begonia Lunar Lights Sterling Moon is an introduction that will be hardy in Zones 7 to 9, but for the Mid-Atlantic, Northeast and Midwest, can be treated as an annual. The leaves are flecked with white and pronounced green veins, and it can get fairly robust in the garden, reaching 24-in. to 30-in. tall. It, too, will thrive in part shade to shade conditions. Bred by Atlanta-based hybridizer Ozzie Johnson, this selection combines beautiful foliage with salmon pink flowers.

Coleus (syn. *Solenostemon*), like begonias, have experienced an amazing “comeback” in the garden. Today, there are dozens of selections, with everything from small groundcover types to large robust plants reaching over 4-ft. tall. One of my favorites is Inferno, reaching 28-in. tall with pure rusty-orange leaves. It can grow in full sun, but can also tolerate some shade. It combines nicely with chartreuse foliated plants like Canna Pretoria, with upright, strap-like leaves highlighting chartreuse and green stripes and orange flowers, as well as any of the yellow foliage elephant ears like Colocasia Maui Gold or Xanthosoma Lime Zinger.

ColorBlaze Sedona Sunset has similar attributes to Inferno, while Redhead is just as robust as Inferno and a great coleus for full sun. The foliage color is a brilliant burgundy red.

Pink-flowering annuals like Gomphrena Fireworks and *Salvia greggii* Mirage Pink really contrast with a bold backdrop of Redhead. Henna reaches 24-in. tall and has a very textural quality, from the frilly edge to the leaf. The leaves are golden-yellow above and pink to red below, which swirls together on the edges to create a highly ornamental annual.

Limewire and Inky Fingers are two more diminutive coleus that are great for the front of the garden or as an edging plant in a container. They're both characterized by deeply lobed leaf margins and dark purple leaf centers with a contrasting green edge.

Eye-catching Annuals

For a strong focal point to add to the perennial garden or as a centerpiece in a container, there are many selections of bananas that can be used for their tropical effect and impact in the garden. Every year, I plant several red Abyssinian bananas. If I use them in a container, it needs to be large, with a minimum diameter of 30-in., otherwise it will get too top heavy and blow over during windstorms during the summer. I purchase my plants as small 2-ft. tall versions, plant in May, and by the end of the summer, they can reach 8- to 12-ft. tall. Their growth rate during the summer alone is remarkable.

Ensete ventricosum Maurelii develops large, strap-like leaves that are skyward facing. Each leaf has a midrib that's burgundy. The leaves are green and have tones of burgundy as well. These bananas thrive best in full sun, and they'll grow exponentially if given ample moisture throughout the summer and supplemental high nitrogen fertilizer.

They combine well with other large, bold-foliaged summer tropicals, such as the elephant ears, Colocasia Illustris, Royal Hawaiian White Lava and Black Magic, or any of the cannas including Tropicanna, B. Marley, and Cannova Bronze Orange and Orange Punch. Last year I combined them with the silver-blue leaves of a native Madagascar palm, *Bismarkia nobilis*.

I love the ornamental annual grasses for their fine foliage. Commonly available in garden centers is the purple fountain grass, *Pennisetum setaceum* Rubrum. The narrow foliage is purple and arches gracefully in the garden, as does the waving, tassel-like flowers that are a tawny purple. They're effective as a single plant in a container, or woven through a perennial garden.

For large stature in the garden, consider the very impactful pearl millet Vertigo with purple arching grass-like foliage.

Jester and Jade Princess have very ornamental purple spike-like seed heads above the grassy foliage. Jester has purple foliage and Jade Princess has green to chartreuse foliage.

All of these plants make great impact in the garden due to their decorative foliage. They can be used to augment the perennial garden or are equally effective for use in ornamental containers. **GP**

Andrew Bunting is the Vice President of Horticulture for the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, which uses horticulture to advance the health and well-being of the Greater Philadelphia region. Andrew has decades of horticultural experience, ranging from his tenures at public gardens in the U.S. and abroad, as well as a published author, gardening expert and sought-after presenter. To learn more about PHS, or to become a member and support greening initiatives in over 250 neighborhoods, visit [PHSonline.org](https://www.phsonline.org).