

Autumn Colour

Like one fabulous fling before we settle down to winter, autumn is the season for colour. Deciduous trees radiate fiery reds and golds, while late blooming perennials and hibiscus turn up the heat.

After a long hot summer, perfect planting weather will soon be upon us and we'll be inspired to get creative outdoors. When deciding what to plant, structure, form and texture are important priorities but playing with colour can be a whole lot of fun.

Hot colours shout the loudest. You only need a splash of yellow, red or orange to make an impact. Yellow and orange are warm and welcoming colours, good for entrance gardens. Attention seeking red is a good colour to highlight an entrance or as warning near steps. The most dramatic reds are the warm orange reds, most brilliant amid a sea of green foliage, and stunning teamed with bronze or silver foliage.

Among the best of the autumn golds, Cone flower (*Rudbeckia*) comes in a wide range of growth habits from 30cm to well over a metre tall. Tall American wildflower, *Helenium*, in shades from bright yellow to rich bronze dies down to a dormant crown for winter, able to withstand sub zero temperatures. *Coreopsis* is another free flowering perennial in warm autumn tones. *Alstroemerias* are easy, free-flowering perennials in a range of eye catching yellows, reds and pinks. *Stoncrop* (*Sedum spectabile*) is one of the few succulents that will grow in heavy soil. It is also extremely drought tolerant with ripe flower heads among autumn's greatest features.

Fuss free Daylilies (*Hemerocallis*) are clump forming perennials which tolerate disease, drought, and damp, sun or semi shade. They're excellent for mass planting and come in a wide range of bright topical colours. Rose hips light up the garden in autumn and winter. Regular dead-heading encourages autumn flowering, but putting the secateurs away in late summer reaps rewards with well-hipped varieties such as *Rosa moyesii*, rugosa roses, and old ramblers such as 'Wedding Day'.

But too much heat can be hectic. For balance, we need lots of relaxing green and cool blues.

Cool blues, purples and greens calm the mind and sharpen the senses. Blue flowers recede into the distance, increasing the feeling of space in small, enclosed gardens. To increase the feeling of depth in a painting, artists often concentrate reds and yellows in the foreground with cool colours in the background. This trick applies to gardens too, making our three dimensional space appear larger than it is. Blue flowers make a good buffer to break up mass groupings of hot coloured flowers and in this way they'll enhance a hot coloured border.

Great blues to plant now include agapanthus, Dutch iris, hyacinth and grape hyacinth bulbs for early spring flowering, forget-me-nots (great with spring bulbs), pansies, violas, and salvia.

Salvias, or sages, bring welcome colour between summer and winter, with some of the brightest blues and the most intense reds. Among the most stunning and easy to grow is the Mexican bush sage, *Salvia leucantha*, a shrubby perennial growing about a metre tall and wide. Its flowers are velvet textured violet rose on arching stems perfect for picking. It's a colour that contrasts superbly

with rich autumn gold rudbeckias and helianthus. Lofty *Salvia mexicana* grows anywhere between 1.5 and 3 metres tall. Its flowers range from blue to purple, attractively highlighted by bright lime-green calyces. Available as seedlings for autumn planting, the annual bedding salvias, such as 'Bonfire' makes a spectacular display of bright red or blue when planted en masse and are ideal for pots.

Classic white against a green background is always fresh and elegant. White flowers stand out in the moonlight, and many of them are fragrant. White flowers for autumn include sasanqua camellias, hibiscus, pansies, viola, cyclamen, and Japanese anemones.

Autumn is the time to plant spring flowering bulbs, including early spring flowering snowflakes, tulips, jonquils and daffodils. In the meantime there are summer and autumn flowering bulbs to enjoy. White and yellow autumn crocus (*Zephyranthes*) are triggered into bloom by autumn showers with several flushes from late summer through to early winter in the north.

With Christmas in mind, May is the month to purchase and plant lily bulbs.

For the best of autumn flowering plant in a sunny position with well-drained soil or potting mix. Water regularly, especially in dry weather and feed with liquid fertiliser. Remove spent flower stems to encourage further flowering. Lift and divide clump-forming perennials every few years, replant the strongest healthiest divisions from the outside of a clump.