



The Autumn Garden of Flower Colors

Autumn is the final burst of color before the grey months of November and December. January will bring hopes of spring with colorful garden catalogs, but for now, let us enjoy all that autumn offers. Yellows, oranges, reds, and purples will dominate the color palette.

I love the autumn color of goldenrods. There is a common misconception that goldenrods cause allergies when they bloom. The truth is that goldenrod pollen is sticky, heavy, and is carried from flower to flower by insect pollinators. The very common Ragweed blooms at the same time and in the same fields as goldenrod, has light, wind-blown pollen; and is the cause of hay fever and fall-time sneezing. Literally hundreds of bumblebees, butterflies, honeybees, native bees and wasps, and small flies will cover the golden flowers. Many of the native goldenrods are coarse looking, very vigorous, and invasive to the point that other plants are crowded out in a few years. Plant those native goldenrod in an area where they will have plenty of room. There are some well-behaved cultivars that are worth considering. 'Fireworks' (3-6'), 'Wichita Mountains' (2-3'), 'Golden Fleece' (1-3'), 'Goldrush' (6"-12") are worth trying. Goldenrods prefer less rich to moderately fertile, well-drained soil in full sun. Remove spent flowers to prevent reseeding. Divide every 3-4 years. Taller species may need staking.

Chrysanthemums add stunning color to the fall garden. Look for University of Minnesota varieties or varieties that will survive our cold (Zone 4) winters. Most Minnesota varieties require little or no pinching back to establish a nice, rounded, mound form. The Maxi-Mums series of Minnesota mums produces large, shrub like plants (3' x 3') in the second or third year, with thousands of flowers on each plant. Mums require excellent drainage, or they may grow poorly and not survive over winter. Mulch to conserve water and to reduce weeding. Fertilize in the spring and again in early August. For best bloom and growth, plant in full sun. Mums need the longer nights of late summer and early fall to set flowers and to bloom; plant away from streetlights and garden lights to promote best bloom. No cultivars are 100% winter hardy under our winter conditions, but a protective straw mulch applied around Thanksgiving will increase the chances of survival. Florist mums, often sold at the big box outlet stores, may not make it through a typical winter here, or if they do, may not flower before hard frosts. Mums benefit from occasional division in the spring. Check the University of Minnesota Extension website for more information on mums.

Asters complement the mums and goldenrods of the fall border. They are long lived, have a wide range of colors, bloom right up to the end of the season, and are butterfly and bee magnets. Colors range from almost blue (sky blue, lavender blue, dark blue) to red to hot pink to white. Heights range from 12-18 inches up to 6 feet and over. Taller types might have to be pinched back early in the season, or staked. Commercial tomato cages are ideal for staking asters. Varieties of the New England aster will tolerate wetter soils in full sun, but they will not over-winter well in wet soil. Perennial asters may be divided every 2-3 years in the spring.

Other flowers to round out the autumn border include the sedums, late-planted annual sunflowers, perennial sunflowers, and pansies. Pansies are available now with a wide range of colors. Tuck them into the empty spaces of your garden to add bright spots in your landscape.

Above all, enjoy all the colors of fall. Plan and plant for more colors in autumn, 2014.

Happy Gardening, Joe Baltrukonis