
Over and Under the Rainbow

A Gardener Comes to Terms with Yellow

by DANIEL MOUNT

NOT LONG AGO, I PLANTED THE PINK-CUPPED DAFFODIL 'Faith' in a client's garden only to be rather sternly chided, "Daffodils should be yellow." My client is hardly chromophobic. She wears royal purple with confidence and, at one point, even dyed her gray hair a shockingly unnatural scarlet. Yet she forbade the use of yellow in her garden. A request I couldn't understand, yet obeyed. So I planted the pink-cupped daffodil.

Victoria Finlay author of *Color: A Natural History of the Palette*, says, of all the colors "yellow gives some of the most mixed messages of all." Garden designers around the world agree, praising yellow as being

"cheerful," "joyous," "luminous," and for its "ability to harmonize." Yet the same designers also warn of yellow being "a show-stealer," "aggressive," "garish," "dominating," even "perilous."

Never shying from raw primary colors, Van Gogh squeezed pure chrome yellow directly from the tube onto the canvas. He considered yellow to be the color of friendship and used it extensively. I find yellow amicable, too. Especially in the garden. It blends with green foliage, pacifies color bullies red and orange by harmonizing with them, and as a light-bringer it is indispensable, especially in the Northwest garden.



Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*) seed fields outside Salem, Oregon. Photo: Daniel Mount

PLANTED

Although it occupies only one-twentieth of the color spectrum, yellow reflects more light than any other, making it truly the brightest color; along with white and silver, it remains visible in the garden well into the hours after sunset.

I often garden like Van Gogh painted, filling borders with golden grasses, acidic hostas, and chlorophyll-starved conifers. I fantasize about an all-yellow garden, but have never dared to make one. There is something a bit frightening about yellow. It can be prissy as a little girl's ruffled Easter dress, pissy in dull shades like mustard or ecru, or high-pitched and screeching in bright tints of citrine and buttercup. Yellow can trump the preciousness of oh-so-rare blue, and if not used properly, dims its complement, violet.

I tend to agree with garden designer Mary Keene who says yellow among all colors is "one of the hardest to use." Yet colorist Malcolm Hillier claims, "Yellow is an easy mixer." The message is mixed. Next to dark colors, yellow looks even brighter, radiating a sense of danger. Think of black and yellow yield signs or a swarm of yellow jackets buzzing around your picnic. Yellow can sap radiance from blues and violets, even reds,

sending them hurtling into the shadows. Color experts repeatedly advise us to use softer, delicious tones like lemon, cream, and vanilla. And not too much.

There goes my all-yellow garden.

Louise Beebe Wilder, a rather cautious garden colorist of the earlier part of the last century, adored yellow. Though she eschewed monochrome garden design in general, she rallied behind gardens made of all-yellow flowers that "like the light of which they seem to be fashioned, blend and combine or flash back at each other with never a jar to the most sensitive eye." The great color harmonizers Nori and Sandra Pope trumpet, "The sun always shines from a yellow planting." Ask any child to draw the sun and he'll pick up a yellow crayon and make a yellow circle on the page and give it a big smile. Simple yellow is wedded to our notions of light and happiness.

Yellow cheers and enlightens.

Yellow has a long association with high-mindedness and the spiritual aspects of human nature. It led one lost wayfarer down a brick road to Oz, new friends, and eventually home. It haloes the saint and robes the Buddhist monk. The Greek goddess of wisdom, Athena, wore



Berberis 'Golden Nugget' and *Rhododendron* 'Star Sapphire' (*augustinii* × *carolinianum*) with various hostas in the Seattle garden of Jon Dove.



The lemony foliage of *Pelargonium* 'Prince Rupert' glows against the dramatic hue of *Eucomis comosa* 'Oakhurst'.



Hakonechloa macra 'All Gold' in fall.

Photos: Daniel Mount



ABOVE: The creamy buff flowers of *Eriogonum heracleoides*.

LEFT: *Pinus contorta* 'Chief Joseph' in the Coenosium Rock Garden dwarf conifer collection, Seattle, Washington.

Photos: Daniel Mount

yellow robes, as did the Emperor of China, the Son of Heaven—a color he forbade to all others. I doubt the Chinese emperor ever had to weed a dandelion-pocked lawn or deal with a pasture covered in creeping buttercup.

Michael Pollan calls primary yellow and its descendants “all too common” for good reason. After green, yellow is the most common plant color, present as carotenoids, one of the most widespread naturally occurring pigments, which interact with chlorophyll to absorb light energy. These pigments are essential in our diets as healthful antioxidants and used by the body in the development of rod and cone cells in the retina that help us see color.

Yellow is also sickly. Hepatitis turns the eyes and skin yellow, as does xanthosis. Chlorosis, the yellowing of leaves, indicates a lack of chlorophyll. In my transition from botanist to gardener, it took me a long time to embrace golden foliage; I always saw illness. Even today, some of the more sulfuric conifers and bilious broad-leafed evergreens turn my stomach. Ah, but I could not live without ‘Sun Power’ hostas, ‘All Gold’ hakone grass, or ‘Rubidor’ weigela.

Christopher Lloyd said, “Yellow in the garden is the peoples’ color.” I agree. It is the one color that even the colorblind can see. Common? I don’t know, Mr. Pollan. By request, I’ve made several yellow-free gardens—it

makes finding weeds a snap. But I’ve always felt that a touch of yellow would have improved any of them.

The alpha and the omega of the garden, yellow winter aconite, witch hazel, and crocus are the first flowers of the nascent garden in late winter. While ginkgo, cottonwood, and larch add a golden foliar glory to the senescent garden in fall. Yet yellow’s triumph is high summer when goldenrod, sunflower, and rudbeckia challenge even the sun. These are anything but the “mellow yellows” Donovan sang about. Call me a yellow-bellied coward, but I find these dominant, aggressive yellows hard to mix and instead relegate them to hot borders—kept well away from cool blue and pink, and put in their place by red and purple, or quieted by orange and brown—where they won’t steal the show.

But for all of summer’s golden glories and autumn’s amber harvest, I find spring yellow the most stirring, like the first rays of sun at dawn or clouds lifting after a storm. After replacing the shameful pink daffodils with golden ‘Mariejke’ in my client’s garden I caught her in the garden with a fresh-picked bouquet and a most childlike and sunny smile. I knew another inevitable friendship was being forged with yellow.

Pacific Northwest-based garden designer Daniel Mount is working his way through the horticultural rainbow.