ELEMENTS OF DESIGN

COLOR
Some Encouraging Words for Gardeners

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY
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Color is the first thing visitors take in when they enter your garden—and your use of color says a lot about you. Are you playful? Sophisticated? Chaotic? Reticent? Our responses to color are visceral and complicated, merging at the crossroads of primitive desire (the search for ripe fruit) and modern fashion (What should I wear to that party tonight?).
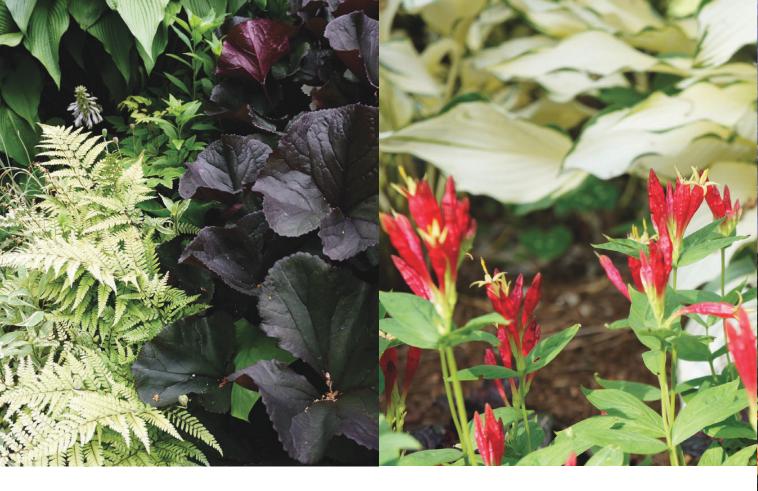
The challenge is not so much how to get more color into your garden, as how to choose colors in the first place. We live in one of the most colorful periods in history. Just walk down the cereal aisle at any grocery store, riffle through the summer dress rack at any department store, or troll down the annual tables at any nursery come spring, and you can see what we are up against.

I tend not to be a rule maker when I teach color classes to gardeners. I try to encourage participants to experience color first hand. Science tells us that we each have a unique and personal appreciation of color. Think of the married couple standing in front of paint swatches at the hardware store: Never have they felt farther apart!

Still, there are some very basic responses to color we all share. Warm colors—reds, yellows, oranges—seem to advance; cool colors—blues, greens, violets—seem to recede, for example. Warm colors excite, whereas cool colors calm.

Whether you intend your garden to be a place for serene relaxation or fun parties—or both—your use of color will be important in achieving your goal. For beginner gardeners, mixing and matching colors can be intimidating, so it's good to familiarize yourself with some of the design fundamentals. (See the sidebar for a list of my favorite books on color.)

Books can teach you about the primary colors (red, blue, yellow), secondary colors (orange, green, purple), and their intermediate tertiary colors (including violet, vermilion and chartreuse). And they can show you how to blend the colors using a simple color wheel.

An easy place to start is mixing "analogous" colors, such as orange and red or green and yellow, which sit beside each other on the wheel. If you feel a little more daring and want to make a plant pop out, you can mix "complementary" colors, such as red and green and purple and yellow, which sit opposite each other on the wheel. "Triadic" schemes attempt to harmonize three colors that are evenly spaced around the wheel, such as purple, green and orange.

A wheel can be a very helpful tool, because today's garden centers are filled with flowers that exhibit the more complex tertiary colors, which can make color blending a challenge to master. Another challenge to adding and mixing color in the garden is working with the dynamics of light. Because the sun's position in the sky changes throughout the day and year, garden light is always in flux. I usually walk around my garden in the evening, after most of the light of day is spent. All the yellow and white flowers begin to glow, picking up subtle shades from the setting sun. In contrast, a sunny, noontime walk would have me

avoiding those same flowers because they glare among the darkness of the greens.

We are all working with green, and we can think of this as a limitation or embrace it. A friend of mine embraced it wholeheartedly, creating a nearly monochromatic green garden. He apologized for the lack of color on my last visit. "There is plenty of color here," I told him approvingly. I found it seductive. What flowers did offer color on that February day—a red salvia still in bloom, a few pinkish hellebores—became singular experiences to be savored.

I sometimes believe I have used too much color in the gardens I have designed. This may have come from years of creating eye-catching "end caps" at the nurseries where I worked. Garden designers often recommend limiting one's palette, such as by creating simple, analogous color schemes. I, too, am coming around more and more to a restrained, less-is-more attitude toward color. This is because a good garden is made firstly from solid form and structure, and secondly by interesting texture.

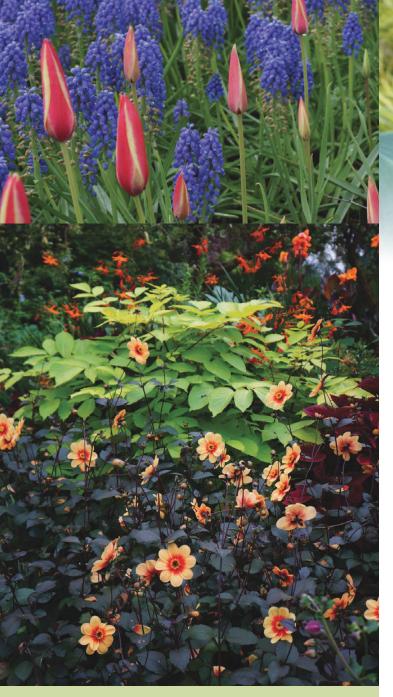That does leave color last, but I wouldn't say necessarily least!

Some of Daniel's Favorite Books on Color

"Colorist: A Practical Handbook for Personal and Professional Use," by Shigenobu Kobayashi (Kodansha USA, 1999). [Though this is not a garden color book per se, the author uses many examples from gardens.]

"The Gardener's Palette," by Sydney Eddison (McGraw Hill, 2002). [Eddison also developed a portable gardener's color wheel, available in stores.]

"The Pantone Book of Color," Leatrice Eiseman and Lawrence Herbert (Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990).

"Malcolm Hillier's Color Garden," by Malcolm Hillier (Dorling Kindersley, 1995).

"Color in Your Garden," by Penelope Hobhouse (Frances Lincoln, 2003).

"Color by Design: Planting the Contemporary Garden," by Nori and Sandra Pope (Soma Books, 1998).

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PHOTO CAPTIONS

1. Page 3: An excited serenity is approached in this seemingly monochromatic combination. The subtle, peachy-orange nears yellow, while the yellows near green, showing the quiet harmony of using analogous colors.

2. Opposite left: Plant color is very complex, as can be seen in this complimentary combination of purples and yellows. Strong and interesting, but not serene.

3. Opposite right: This combo is a strong warm/cool triad. The yellow foliage acts as a bridge between the charged reds and greens.

4. Above, upper left: This photo shows how warm colors (red) advance, while cool colors (blue) recede. Green, a combination of a cool and warm color, becomes a neutral middle ground. Gardeners are always working off of a green middle ground.

5. Above right: In this combo, two strongly contrasting greens, the blue-green of the hosta and the yellow-green of the sweet flag, create a very dynamic picture—though the shared green component also creates harmony.

6. Above, lower left: The ratio of warm colors to cool colors is near perfect in this analogous color scheme featuring red, orange and yellow over a sea of varying greens. Warm colors should always be used sparingly.