

Great Combinations, Favorite Plants

The best of the best perennials, trees and shrubs

I. The basic elements of "best"

If it's not the right plant for the site, it simply cannot be great.

Given: If it impressed you in photo, description or sight, it's *healthy*.

Seasonal color: Wonderful to see but it's just one of many landscape features.

Flower color lasts only 1 to 4 weeks.

Long-blooming species may add 2 - 3 weeks, usually require more care.

A repeat blooming plant's 2nd show is no match for its main season.

So grant the flower power but make the leaf chief and don't stint on other tints!

All greens are not equal! Their differences are most apparent in combination.

Variegated and colorful-foliage varieties carry the summer show.

Spring leaf-out and fall change of color: As long lasting and predictable as bloom.

Seeds and berries can be spectacular.

Evergreens fill winter, our longest season of interest.

Leaf size and form play an important role in combinations.

Plant form / habit/ shape: More powerful and enduring than color alone.

Even at dusk and dawn, the outlines show -- and glow.

Spires/columns/ pyramidal forms arrest attention. Don't overdo them.

Mounded, spreading/vase and carpet forms give flow and stability.

Some forms neat, regular; others more irregular.

If you prune, enhance the natural shape, don't fight it.

Distinct differences in plant height adds drama to a combination of shapes.

Space is often essential for showcasing plant form. Don't crowd!

Textural combinations give a landscape deep, rich dimension.

Texture is the visual pattern of light and shadow on the surface and outline of an object. Put on your black-and-white glasses to see texture.

Coarse texture is bold pattern, large distinct light and dark areas. Polka dots!

Fine texture is a close weave, subtle light-dark pattern. Tweed!

Medium texture is somewhere between coarsest and finest companion items.

Texture is always relative. Hosta may be coarse until bigleaf magnolia added.

Texture may differ between leafy and leafless seasons.

Where to gather ideas, beyond today's presentation:

Resources that list plants by site or provide detailed info about cultural needs --

Native Trees, Shrubs & Vines for Urban & Rural America, Gary Hightshoe

Manual of Woody Landscape Plants, Michael Dirr

Landscape Plants for Eastern North America, Harrison Flint

Perennials and Their Garden Habitat, Richard Hansen & Friedrich Stahl

Perennial Reference Guide, Karleen Shafer & Nicole Lloyd Stipes Publ. 2007

II. Building a great combo.

"Best" plants are under our noses. Start with one suited to the site. Build on that!

Yew, crabapple, burning bush, dwarf spirea, arborvitae... they're common for good reason! So don't start from scratch, build on existing steady-eddy's.

Step one, fill in the blanks for plant number one (_____):

- Get specific about its colors and times of --
 Bloom _____
 Leaf-out or emergence of new greenery _____
 Summer leaf color _____
 Fall leaf color _____
 Winter leaf color _____
 Berries / seed pods _____
 Bark color _____
- State its natural or gardener-enforced shape (_____)
 And its size (be realistic!) (ht. _____ width _____)
- Determine its texture, relative to most plants (_____)

Step two, pick a companion suited to the same site (_____):

Identify its other characteristics (same as for plant #1)

Assess the two plants' compatibilities.

Figure how many of each is necessary for the two to be equal in mass or one to be star, other to be chorus line.

Step three, pick one or two more companions for that site (_____):

Identify its/their other characteristics (as for plant #1)

Assess how this/these plants' will impact the 1-2 combination.

Figure how many of each is necessary for these additional plants to be added as chorus line members.

Step four, note the seasonal gaps, if any.

	Win	Mar	Apr	May	Jn	Jl	Aug	Sept	Oct/Nov
Plant 1 _____									
Plant 2 _____									
Plant 3 _____									
Plant 4 _____									

Make it a priority to fill those gaps in your next combo.

III. Plants and combinations you can try, grouped by site.

(* = perennial/groundcover)

Sunny, part shady, shady, dry, soggy and sites with specially tough conditions

Sunny, moist, well-drained plants and combinations

Clarifying terms:

- "Sunny" is a minimum of 6 hours direct sun each growing-season day.
- "Moist, well-drained" is where upper 18 inches of soil can hold moisture for at least several days but all excess water drains away in just 12-20 hours.

Consider these combos (common "starter" plants underlined):

- Sugar maple, red barberry, & dwarf golden ninebark (*Acer saccharum*, *Berberis thunbergii* varieties, *Physocarpus opulifolius* varieties)
- Yellowwood tree (ZA beech), dwarf burning bush, bluestar & *sea kale (*Cladrastis kentuckea*, *Euonymus a. compacta*, *Amsonia tabernaemontana*, **Crambe maritima*)
- Seven son shrub, dwarf white pine, bridalwreath spirea and fall stonecrop (*Heptacodium miconioides*, *Pinus strobus nana*, *Spiraea prunifolia*, **Sedum* 'Autumn Joy')
- Sargent viburnum, dwarf blue Pfitzer juniper & *cranesbill (*Viburnum sargentii* 'Onondaga', *Juniperus pf. glauca*, **Geranium macrorrhizum*, *G. himalayense*, *G. dalmaticum*)

Look into these individuals to add to your own singlets and one-two combos:

For color beyond flower:

Katsura tree (*Cercidiphyllum japonicum*)

Threadleaf falsecypress (*Chamaecyparis pisifera* varieties)

Dwarf *Spiraea x bumalda* varieties ('Gold Flame', 'Gold Mound', 'Crispa')

*Husker Red beardtongue (*Penstemon* 'Husker Red')

For great or unusual form:

Sunkist arborvitae (*Thuja* 'Sunkist')

*Purple bush clover (*Lespedeza thunbergii*)

*Big betony (*Stachys micrantha*)

As textural wonders:

Japanese aralia tree (*Aralia elata*)

Bluestar juniper (*J. squamata* 'Blue Star')

*Threadleaf ironweed (*Vernonia lettermanii*)

*Stonecrop *Sedum* 'Vera Jameson'

Part-shade, moist, well-drained plants and combinations

Clarifying terms:

"Part shade" (aka "part sun") is between 4 and 6 hours of direct sun each day

Consider these combos:

- Tiger Eye sumac, boxwood, *bunchberry & *foamflower
(*Rhus typhina* 'Tiger Eye', *Buxus koreana* 'Winter Gem',
**Cornus canadensis*, *Tiarella cordifolia*)
- Paperbark maple, Chenault coralberry & *Siberian iris
(*Acer griseum*, *Symphoricarpos x chenaultii*, **Iris sibirica*)
- Beech, spicebush, bayberry, *Japanese painted fern & *winter aconite
(*Fagus* sp., *Lindera benzoin*, *Myrica/Morella pensylvanica*,
**Athyrium* g. 'Pictum' & **Eranthis hyemalis*)
- Ginkgo, Ural false spirea, *Sugar & Cream hostas and *English bluebells
(*Ginkgo biloba*, *Sorbaria sorbifolia*, *hosta S&C, **Campanulata hyacinthoides*)

Look into these individuals to add to your own singlets and one-two combos:

- For color beyond flower:
 - Judd viburnum (*V. x juddii*)
 - Chokeberry, red and purplefruit (*Aronia arbutifolia* & *A. x prunifolia*)
 - Cornelian cherry (*Cornus mas*)
 - Eastern wahoo (*Euonymus atropurpureus*)
 - Serviceberry (*Amelanchier* spp.)
 - Summersweet (*Clethra alnifolia*)
 - Three-flower maple (*Acer triflorum*)
 - (*Variegated) masterwort (*Astrantia* varieties)
 - White fir (*Abies concolor*)
- For great or unusual form:
 - Birdsnest spruce (*Picea abies* 'Nidiformis', other small mounded cultivars)
 - *Fringecups (*Tellima grandiflora*)
 - *Turtlehead (*Chelone* spp.)
- As textural wonders:
 - *Dwarf goatsbeard (*Aruncus aethusifolius*)
 - Dwarf hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis* cultivars)
 - Elderberry (*Sambucus* spp.)
 - Leatherleaf viburnum (*V. rhytidophylloides*)
 - *'Painter's Palette' tovara (*Polygonum*-, *Fallopia*-, or *Persicaria* 'P.P')

Shady, moist, well-drained plants and combinations

Clarifying terms:

"Shade" is 2 to 4 hours direct sun each summer day, usually more in winter

Consider these combos:

- Red maple, Ward's yew, snowball *Hydrangea*, *'Ivory Jade' euonymus & *barrenwort (*Acer rubrum*, *Taxus x media* 'Wardii', *Hydrangea arborescens*, **Euonymus fortunei* 'Ivory Jade', **Epimedium*)
- Sugar maple, bottlebrush buckeye, Deutzia 'Nikko', *variegated bigleaf forget-me-not & *variegated Jacob's ladder (*Acer saccharum*, *Aesculus parviflora*, *Deutzia* 'Nikko', **Brunnera macrophylla* 'Variegata', **Polemonium* 'Stairway to Heaven')

Look into these individuals to add to your own singlets and one-two combos:

- For color beyond flower:
 - *Baneberry (*Actaea rubra*)
 - Fringetree (*Chionanthus virginicus*)
 - **Lamium maculatum* varieties
 - Musclewood / blue beech / ironwood (*Carpinus caroliniana*)
 - Scarlet elder (*Sambucus pubens*)
 - Spicebush (*Lindera* spp.)
 - Striped maple (*Acer pensylvanicum*, esp. 'White Tigress')
 - Variegated aralia tree (*Aralia elata* 'Variegata')
- For great or unusual form:
 - American (fall) witchhazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*)
 - Balsam fir (*Abies balsamea*)
 - *Blackjack jack in the pulpit (*Arisaema sikokianum*)
 - Panicle hydrangea (*H. paniculata*)
 - Pagoda dogwood (*Cornus alternifolia*)
 - Richweed (*Collinsonia canadensis*)
- As textural wonders:
 - *Ginger (*Asarum* spp.)
 - *Solomon's seal: great, variegated & starry false
(**Polygonatum* & *Smilacina* spp.)
 - Bayberry (*Myrica/Morella pensylvanica*)

Drought-tolerant plants and combinations

Clarifying terms:

- "Drought" -- occasional absence of readily-available water in the soil
- "Tolerance" -- ability to persist in the presence of the stated condition. Growth, flowering and seed set may slow. Generally acquired over time under this influence and is exhibited most strongly by established plants.

Consider these combos:

- Hawthorn, *fragrant sumac, *yucca, *rug juniper and *evergreen pinks (*Crataegus* spp., **Rhus aromatica* 'Lo-Gro', **Juniperus horizontalis*, **Dianthus gratianopolitanus* 'Bath's Pinks')
- Crabapple, golden spreading juniper, *leadplant, *zebra iris (*Malus* variety, *Juniperus chinensis* 'Gold Coast', **Iris pallida argenteo-variegata*)
- Beautybush, leatherleaf viburnum (pruned each May to maintain at 5'), *starry false Solomon's seal, *barren strawberry (*Kolkwitzia amabilis*, *V. rhytidophylloides*, **Smilacina stellata*, **Waldsteinia fragaria*)

Look into these individuals to add to your own singlets and one-two combos:

- For color beyond flower:
 - Barberry (*Berberis* spp. & varieties)
 - *Coralberry (*Symphoricarpos x chenaultii*, *S. orbiculatus*)
 - *Gray leaf speedwell (*Veronica incana*)
 - Staghorn-, laceleaf-, and shining sumac (*Rhus typhina*, *R. typhina*. 'Laciniata', *R. copallina*)
 - *Snow in summer (*Cerastium tomentosum*)
- For great or unusual form:
 - Bristlecone pine (*Pinus aristata*)
 - Bur oak (*Quercus macrocarpa*)
 - *Northern sea oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*)
 - Red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana* upright and blue varieties)
 - Scholar tree (*Sophora japonica*)
- As textural wonders:
 - *Large flowered comfrey (*Symphytum grandiflorum*)
 - *Ornamental mullein (*Verbascum* spp. & varieties)
 - *Prairie dropseed grass (*Sporobolus heterolepis*)
 - *Thyme (*Thymus* spp. & varieties)

Soggy conditions plants and combinations

Clarifying terms:

"Soggy" -- at times during the growing season soil pore spaces are nearly full of water; oxygen content is low. Water may or may not stand on the surface.

Consider these combos:

- River birch, summersweet, *darkleaf white snakeroot
(*Betula nigra*, *Clethra alnifolia*, **Eupatorium* 'Chocolate')
- Black gum, elderberry, and meadowsweet*
(*Nyssa sylvatica*, *Sambucus* spp., **Filipendula hexapetala*)
- Variegated redosier dogwood, *variegated false sweet flag, *quamash and *skunk cabbage (*Cornus sericea* 'Silver 'n Gold', *Acorus calamus variegatus*, *Camassia* 'Blue Danube', *Symplocarpus foetidus*)
- Baldcypress, red chokeberry, potentilla, *globeflower, *creeping forget-me-not (*Taxodium distichum*, *Aronia arbutifolia*, *Potentilla fruticosa*, *Trollius ledbourii*, *Myosotis scorpioides*)

Look into these individuals to add to your own singlets and one-two combos:

- For color beyond flower:
 - Black spruce (*Picea mariana*)
 - Cranberrybush viburnum (*V. trilobum*)
 - Ninebark (*Physocarpus opulifolius*)
 - Swamp white oak (*Quercus bicolor*)
- For great or unusual form:
 - Blazing star (*Liatris spicata*)
 - Hardhack- and meadowsweet spirea (*Spiraea tomentosa*, *S. alba*)
 - *Turtlehead (*Chelone* spp.)
- As textural wonders:
 - American arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis* dwarf and variegated forms)
 - Bayberry (*Myrica pensylvanica*)
 - Dawn redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*)
 - *Joe Pye (*Eupatorium purpureum*)
 - *Prairie dock (*Silphium terebinthinaceum*)