



Perennials with distinctive forms and foliage: yucca (left) and maiden grass

Plants with presence

Large, shapely perennials give structure to a garden, just as trees and shrubs do

RECENTLY I SAW A VICTORIAN house with two stands of giant plume poppies flanking its gates. The stately plants, six to eight feet tall, with their blue-green leaves the size and shape of fig leaves, were an unusual choice but they made an elegant frame for the wrought-iron gates, looking more like stalwart shrubs than the perennials they are.

We forget this about perennials—that many of them are tall enough to frame a gate, sculptural enough to stand alone, dramatic enough to be a focal point. Usually we think of them as growing only in borders, planted in drifts and prized for the color of their flowers and the season of their bloom. But many perennials offer much more. The great garden maker

Russell Page described them as “architecturally striking”—plants we can enjoy for their flowers and then enjoy much longer for their strong shapes and exotic foliage.

These perennials do for a garden what trees and shrubs do: act as architectural components to create a framework or to define a space. And, like trees and shrubs, these plants come in a wonderful diversity of forms: rounded and arched, spreading and spiky, vertical and horizontal. But unlike slow-growing woody plants, which can take years to mature, perennials grow up fast. When I landscaped my own yard in Brooklyn, New York, I planted plume poppies (*Macleaya Cordata*) in spots where I ultimately wanted shrubs. (I would only plant this very invasive beauty inside a barrier like a metal collar—or in a large planter—to contain its rushing roots.) The *Macleaya* gave me the mass and volume I needed almost immediately and so kept me from tapping my toe impatiently while I waited for the shrubs to grow.

Crambe cordifolia, flowering sea kale, is another architecturally striking perennial. Clouds of baby’s breath-like flowers billow above the dark green foliage, but after the flowers are gone the huge, puckered cabbage-textured leaves on tall stalks make a splendid addition to a garden.

A perennial I love and wish that I could grow in my Zone 7 garden is the sumptuous *Melianthus major*. At about eight feet tall, with soft, silvery serrated leaves, it looks like a small, languid ash tree. Its sculptural shape makes it ideal for marking a turn in a path because the plant seems to say, “Look here” or “Walk this way.”

The eryngiums—and there are many different kinds, from twelve inches to eight feet—are dramatic plants when they are flowering and just as dramatic when they are not. A bristly bract necklace frames the steel blue flowers and then the marvelous seedheads that follow. Even the silvery-blue jagged leaves and blue-toned stems contribute to the impact these plants make.

Equally dramatic is *Yucca filamentosa*. Its coarse, swordlike leaves support magnificent creamy flowers that (Continued on page 105)

Unlike slow-growing shrubs, which can take years to mature, perennials grow up fast

rise to look us in the eye. Like all plants in the form of tall spikes or swords, yucca is dramatic, but it must be planted carefully where no one will accidentally bump into it. Its sharp serrated edges can be dangerous. New Zealand flax is much friendlier, but similar in mood and even larger. With smooth, gray-green leaves that grow to nine feet, it is striking when planted next to a garden step or to define the transition from terrace to garden. And *Iris pallida* 'Variegata,' with cream-and-gray sword-shaped leaves in the shape of a fan, offers pure Art Deco elegance.

Rounded leaves, on the other hand, no matter how large, seem soothing and serene. In a woodland garden try *Ligularia dentata* 'Desdemona.' Its flowers—bright orange daisies—are almost tropical, as are the big, rounded leathery leaves. The ornamental rhubarb *Rheum palmatum* 'Atrosanguineum,' a perennial growing to three feet high and six

feet wide, is often used as an accent among less striking plants. Its deeply cut leaves start out red and remain red on the underside even after the top has turned glossy green.

Like almost every gardener I know, I have learned much about designing with these architectural perennials—and particularly about using them in large masses—from the work of the Washington, D.C., firm of Oehme & van Sweden. James van Sweden and Wolfgang Oehme use plants boldly, planting great swaths that fill a garden with a sense of motion. In their garden in front of the Federal Reserve building in Washington, D.C., which is always open to the public, they have planted sweeps of low-growing *Bergenia Cordifolia* punctuated by the tawny, delicate stalks of maiden grass, *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Gracillimus.' The grass sways gracefully above the thick paddle-shaped leaves of the bergenia. Nearby is another of their signature

plants, *Sedum x telephium* 'Autumn Joy.' From August on, its thick, succulent leaves and tight, rounded flowers look like a sea of ruddy bronze in an irregular frame of sword-shaped yucca leaves.

Russell Page specifically mentioned bergénias and grasses in his autobiography, *The Education of a Gardener*, and he described them as plants with "luster and distinction of form." Page was famous in gardening circles because he chose plants "whose flowering is secondary to their form and texture."

And so should we all. A garden that is pretty with flowers can be wonderful for a while, but every garden needs plants that hold their own when the flowering is over. **hb**

Cynthia Milliken Gillis, a garden designer based in Brooklyn, N.Y., also wrote about Betty Graubaum's vegetable garden in this issue.

(Continued on page 110)

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