

July 23, 2017 Garden Column

Late summer flowers

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A late summer garden has a tranquility found at no other time of the year. - William F. Longgood, author. Safe to say, most gardeners, after a long, monochromatic winter, look forward to spring blooms more than the flowers of late summer and fall. However, cast aside summer ennui and enjoy a placid and sedate late summer garden; pleasing to the senses with colorful blooms and erratic flights of butterflies, and a background hum of bees buzzing from bloom to bloom.

Luther Burbank said, "Flowers always make people feel better, happier, and more helpful; they are sunshine, food and medicine for the soul." This thought is as pertinent for late blooms that follow summer as for spring flowers that follow winter.

A garden changes daily as new buds open into a colorful bloom. However blooms eventually fade leaving only foliage. But, like a parade, with a succession of floats, bands, tractors, fire engines, and clowns, a garden can be a display of blooms throughout the growing season.

Fall gardens with their purples, rusts, scarlets, and golds can be very colorful. But gardens take some planning as hardy fall flowers ideally should to be planted and established earlier in the season. However, well tended plants in pots will also do well when planted later in the season.

Most perennials bloom only 3 to 4 weeks. Without knowing when they bloom, much color could occur in late June and early July but very little in August and September. Foliage plays an important part in the perennial garden too. Even though a plant isn't blooming, its leaves add color, form and texture. This may be particularly valuable in shady gardens where coleus, fern fronds, and hosta leaves can be as beautiful as the perennial flowers that might bloom there.

Many people combine both annuals and perennials in the garden. Flowering annuals such as petunias, sweet alyssum, or dwarf marigolds bloom all summer long and provide continuity of color when some perennials may stop blooming. However, other perennials bloom for eight to ten weeks or more and attract a larger number of bees and butterflies than early season

blooms. This may be because these desirable insects have had time to reproduce and become more numerous during the season or late season blooms may simply provide more nectar.

Following are suggestions for a few late season “bloomers”. Balloon flower or Campanula blooms begin as a “bubble” that pops open when they’re ready to bloom. This is a profuse bloomer in lavender-blue, pale pink, or white. The plants spread slowly, filling in a garden without becoming a nuisance. Other than cutting the plants back in the spring or fall, virtually no other maintenance is required.

Goldenrod has suffered from the mistaken notion that it exacerbates hay fever. Ragweed is the real culprit, not Goldenrod. This is one of the last flowers to bloom in the fall. Most varieties are tall and stately; however, there are several dwarf varieties available. Goldenrod cultivars do not spread by rhizomes so they do not take over the whole garden. Some sources state that goldenrod is hardy only in USDA Zones 4 - 8; however, it will likely do well in the Grand Rapids area.

Joe Pye, sometimes called Joe Pye Weed, is one of those native plants we take for granted because it often grows by the side of the road. Joe Pye can be aggressive. However, many of the newer varieties have been bred to grow shorter with a less “weedy” nature. Additionally, newer cultivars make a wonderful backdrop to a garden border and the dense mop heads of the mauve or white flowers blend beautifully into the fall garden.

Mums and pumpkins are the flag bearers of fall. There are many varieties of mums, but not all are particularly hardy even though they are rated to be so in USDA Zones 3-9. The plants sold in the fall as “Hardy Mums” should be gotten in the ground immediately. Keep them well watered and mulch once the ground freezes and you’ll stand your best chance of having truly hardy mums.

Snakeroot, is also called cimicifuga, or bugbane. Snakeroot makes a wonderful focal point in the fall garden. This plant grows well in partial shade, where a little drama is always welcome. The plant itself only grows 3 to 4 feet high, but the flower stalks will grow 6 to 7 feet in height. Snakeroot takes awhile to become established, but be patient; it’s worth it.

Sneezeweed or Helenium. This 2 to 5 feet, erect perennial has many elongate leaves and numerous flower heads. A winged stem bears yellow, daisy-like flower heads with fan-shaped, drooping rays. “Disk” flowers form a conspicuous, greenish-yellow, ball-like structure at center of each head. The

flowers have raised centers and wedge-shaped, yellow petals that end in three “teeth”. The common name is based on the former use of its dried leaves in making snuff, inhaled to cause sneezing that would supposedly rid the body of evil spirits.

Sedum 'Autumn Joy', also called stonecrop, comes as close to perfection as any plant can. It looks good all year, requires minimal attention and attracts few problems. Its only drawback is that it is not deer resistant. However, the blossoms must contain a sweet nectar as plants host numerous bees, especially on warm, late summer and fall days.. Butterflies also visit the blossoms but it does not seem to attract hummingbirds.

The Coreopsis genus or Tickseed is home to many popular garden plants. Most bloom periodically throughout the summer season, but if you prune plants back after flowering, they will put on a glorious fall display. The cheery yellow flowers may be most familiar, but tickseed now comes in other colors, like red and pink. Most diseases and pests avoid them. Some sources state that this plant is adapted to USDA Zone 3 to 4 and warmer but it seems to flourish in most Grand Rapids area gardens.

Turtlehead or Chelone got its nick-name for the blossoms shaped like turtle heads, if one uses their imagination. Turtlehead is one of my favorite late blooming flowers because of it's glorious foliage and ease of transplanting. It's a carefree perennial that is perfect for a damp area in your garden and is affected only by excessive dry heat. Turtlehead behaves itself, growing in a dense clump with attractive foliage and red, pink or white flowers that bloom for weeks.

There are several other late blooming flowers also such as false indigo, Gillardia, Cranesbill and the Rudbeckias to name a few. Consult the experts at Bloomers and choose what will become your favorite blooms.