

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener  
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Contact: WSU/Skagit County Extension: 428-4270

It isn't too soon to be thinking about what to do for color in your garden this fall. Here are a few suggestions that are unusual, rich in color and texture, and are moderately priced.

Ceratostigma plumbaginoides (hardly plumbago) – This is a perennial spreading ground cover. It has narrow red stems with bright deep-blue flowers that bloom from early autumn to first hard frost. Even after the blooms die down, the leaves turn from green to red for longer enjoyment. It is hardy in zones 6-9, can be grown in either sun or shade and can take a wide variety of soils. It looks spectacular when paired with the succulent Sedum “Autumn Joy” or with the silver foliage of Artemisia “Powis Castle.”

Panicum virgatum (switch grass) – This is a clump-forming columnar perennial grass. The 20 inch long blooms dance wonderfully in the breeze on stems that go from silver to purple-green. It does best in fertile, well drained soil, full sun and is hardy in zones 5-10. It looks good as a specimen plant on its own or massed together. It also goes well with Echinacea purpurea and Phlox paniculata.

Leonotis leonurus (lion's ear) - This is a shrub, native to South Africa. It can grow up to 6 feet tall if given lots of water, sun and fertilizer. This shrub gets whorls of spectacular tubular orange flowers. It is hardy in zone 10 but cuttings can be taken in the fall or the entire plant can be brought indoors for the winter. It goes well with Verbena bonariensis, Aster frikartii ‘Monch’ and Salvia vanhouttii.

Salvia vanhouttii – This is a mound-forming salvia that grows to 3 ½ feet tall. Its beautiful flower clusters range from orange to deep red (depending on how much sun it gets) and hummingbirds are attracted to it. These blooms contrast nicely with pale purples and blues of asters and oranges of other fall foliage. It blooms from late summer through autumn. It's hardy in zones 9 and 10 and will probably need to be taken indoors for the winter.

Caryopteris x clandonensis cultivars (blue mist shrub, or bluebeard) – This is a woody perennial, originally from Asia. This would be a great addition to a shrub or herbaceous border. Its blue or purple flowers sit on very delicate silver stems 3 feet high. It begins to bloom sometime between late summer and fall. It does best in rich well-drained soil in full sun, but will tolerate light shade. It self-seeds, but weeding keeps it under control. It is hardy in zones 5-9.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.

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