

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener  
Date: May 29, 2005  
Contact: WSU/Skagit County Extension: 428-4270

Sometimes it is difficult to find plants that will thrive in a shady spot in the garden. Brunnera macrophylla or Siberian bugloss is a little plant that lives happily in dim corners and blends nicely with other shade-loving perennials. It is low growing and can be used as a ground cover. However, it is not as invasive as most ground covers. Brunnera grows slowly, gradually forming a large clump. The blossoms appear in the spring and are true blue in color, resembling forget-me-not flowers. The blooms are born on branching stems that stand above the foliage giving the plant an airy look. The bristly foliage begins small but grows to 6 or 8 inch heart-shaped leaves by mid summer. The plant reaches 18 inches in height while in bloom and is best placed toward the front of a border. Brunnera mix well with other perennials like hostas, ferns, hellebores, epimediums, and heuchera. As the foliage grows, it will camouflage daffodil foliage as they die down.

Of the different varieties of Brunnera the most striking are the ones with variegated leaves. "Dawson's White" has irregular creamy white leaf margins and 'Nodspen Cream' has a narrower white leaf margin. Probably the most robust variegated form is 'Jack Frost'. It has a silvery overlay on the leaves with green borders and veins. These variegated types sparkle in shaded areas. A relative of Brunnera is Anchusa azurea or Italian bugloss. They are both members of the borage family. Anchusa also has intense blue flowers. It grows taller than Brunnera and is not as attractive. It usually needs staking but the variety 'Royal Blue' is compact, only reaching a height of 3 feet.

Brunnera are not difficult to grow. They do, however, benefit from a little TLC. They prefer a moist, well drained soil with plenty of organic material added. They need to be watered at the driest times during the summer. An occasional light application of fertilizer is also appreciated. Brunnera are not bothered by pest or diseases. Their prickly leaves discourage slugs and deer. Brunnera will self seed if the flower heads are left to mature but the seedlings are not true to the parent plant. Plants can go many years without needing dividing. If the plant begins to die in the center then it is time to divide by taking root cuttings.

Check with your local nursery for this durable, easy-care little perennial; it will make an interesting addition to any garden.

The information provided in this news release is for education purposes only. Reference to commercial products or trade names is made with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement by Cooperative Extension is implied. Cooperative Extension programs and employment are available to all without discrimination.

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.

---