



'Firetail'.is the tall plant on the left, with *P. Virginiana* on the lower right.

CAROL BARANY PHOTO

# Plants Bring People Together

And it doesn't matter if your garden is perfect or fried from the heat of summer.

by Carol Barany for Yakima Valley Master Gardeners

One steamy evening last week, my garden was one of a dozen open gardens on the annual Barge-Chestnut Neighborhood Garden Walk. Getting ready, I had to keep reminding myself that you can't find a better way to relate to your neighbors than through their gardens. One of life's great truths is that plants bring people together.

Yet I was fretting over welcoming visitors to my garden of sun-burned foliage and browning turf. I had counted on the dahlias to be blooming their heads off, just in time for the tour. Unfortunately, they shut down in protest weeks ago, holding out for cooler weather.

I was ready to give up myself.

It turns out I had a wildcard up my sleeve. Some of my favorite plants were looking good, and that gave me something to talk about, besides whining and complaining about my failures. Thank heavens for *Persicaria*.

I planted *Persicaria amplexicaulis* 'Firetail' after seeing it in my daughter Alison's Olympia garden. By mid-June, I can expect it to be covered in blooms, with the show going strong until frost without deadheading.

The Dutch plantsman Piet Oudolf is transforming garden design with his prairie-style landscapes, and 'Firetail' is featured in many of them. While not aggressive, in a few seasons a small start of this beauty was drifting and weaving through the garden.

I'm out there with snips every morning, harvesting the long-stemmed, upright deep pinky-red bottlebrush-blossoms for bouquets. On long, thin, leafless stems, they are a flower arranger's dream.

I must admit that '*Persicaria* Pinky-red' is not my favorite color. In a perfect world of my design, *Persicarias* would bloom in purple, blue, or dark burgundy. But somehow, these blossoms manage to add interest and grace to just about any summer bouquet I can put together. They also attract more bees and hummingbirds than anything I grow.

That's why a few years ago, I planted every *P. amplexicaulis* I could find, including 'Fat Domino', 'Blackfield', 'Orange Field', 'Taurus', and 'Golden Arrow'. Except for the salmon pink blooms of 'Orange Field', all *amplexicaulis* varieties produce almost identical flowers.

'Golden Arrow' offers something extra. Lance-shaped leaves in my favorite shade of chartreuse light up darker areas of the garden (grow it in part-shade), with the same narrow tassel-like spikes of the same deep pinky-red from early summer until frost.

I also grow *P. bisorta* 'Superba'. You won't find a hint of red in the spikes of pale pink produced earlier than others in the family. I cut loads of stems for May bouquets, and the plant is sending up a second flush of blooms, even in this heat.

*P. microcephala* 'Red Dragon' produces small sprays of creamy white flowers, but is grown mainly for its foliage. Pointy heart-shaped leaves are full of

my favorite shade of plum, and further adorned with silvery V-shaped markings. I keep the plants gracefully mounding by Chelsea Chopping them each spring. Despite a reputation for being tender in Yakima, mine come through the harshest winters without any special care.

I got my first *Persicaria virginiana* from my sister-in-law Kit, who finds it sprouting in the cracks of her Portland driveway. She's not happy about it. I haven't found it to be the least bit rambunctious, and appreciate the occasional seedlings. Visitors to my garden always want to take one home.

I grow *P. virginiana* for its colorful foliage, which features a burgundy chevron on each lime-green leaf. An upright grower with wiry, muted red flower stems in the fall, this perennial slowly makes clumps to three feet by three feet. It does well in the sun, but also thrives in fairly dry shade, which is a considerable virtue.

*Persicaria orientalis*, better known as 'Kiss Me Over the Garden Gate' was my first *Persicaria*, a gift from my friend Renee. This annual can grow to seven feet, dangling sprays of watermelon pink from late-summer until frost. A dramatic 'spiller' in bouquets, it was a cottage garden favorite of Thomas Jefferson.

Like so many heirloom plants, "Kiss Me" is uncommon these days. Maybe it's because it grows fast and doesn't like being transplanted, making it a poor candidate for bedding plant cell-packs. Grow it once from seed, and you'll always have a batch of self-sown seedlings to share in the spring.

On endless days of triple digit temperatures, it's tempting to throw in the towel and say, "It's too hot to garden." Plants are dying. There's a battle raging with bugs and diseases, rashes, scratches, and sunburn. But just like everything else in life, gardening is not easy.

Is it worth it?

Absolutely. I picked my first dahlia this morning.

GARDENING PROBLEMS? The public is encouraged to visit the Master Gardener diagnostic clinic in Union Gap, Mondays and Fridays from 9-12 and 1-4. Contact us at 509-574-1604 or email [gardener@yakima.wa.us](mailto:gardener@yakima.wa.us). We are also available at the Downtown Yakima Farmer's Market each Sunday morning through mid October. For better identification, bring a sample of the damaged plant in a sealed zip-lock bag.

