

## Heuchera

by Carol Barany

“White coral bells upon a slender stalk,  
Lily-of-the Valley deck my garden walk.  
Oh, don’t you wish that you could hear them ring?  
That will only happen when the fairies sing.”

I’ve never forgotten the sing-song lyrics to this sweet nursery rhyme of my childhood. But it wasn’t until I became a gardener that I recognized that “coral bells” referred to the nodding bell-shaped flowers of the Heuchera that I now had growing along my garden walk.

While these plants may look dainty, don’t let them fool you.

Last year, autumn in the Yakima Valley felt more like summer. Weeks of higher than normal temperatures gave perennial plants the impression that it was still growing season, and dormancy was postponed. When temperatures dropped dramatically in mid-November, many plants were damaged. For now, I’ll look the other way while they take their time to recover.

In such a winter, the amazing durability of Heuchera absolutely shines. Mine stayed evergreen all winter, and began putting out new growth in late March. This is even more remarkable because some of my Heuchera were planted in pots that remained outside and unprotected, a sure death sentence for many perennials. That’s because the roots of plants in pots are far more vulnerable to frigid temperatures than those planted in the shelter of garden soil.

Single digit temperatures? “Meh”, replies Heuchera, “give me something hard.” After all, these survivors are hardy to 30 degrees below zero.

The genus was named by Carl Linnaeus to honor a friend, the 18<sup>th</sup> century Austrian medical botanist and professor of medicine Johann Heinrich von Heucher. I first knew Heuchera as Coral Bells. Maybe you know it as alumroot, which references the medicinal use of some of the species as an astringent to stop bleeding.

Members of the Saxifragaceae family, the genus consists of about 55 species of evergreen to semi-evergreen herbaceous perennials. All North American natives, they can be found in a wide range from Arizona to Alaska. In fact, coral bells were one of the first plants exported back to Europe in the 1600s by early American explorers.

Many of these native Heucheras were old-time garden perennials in the gardens of our grandparents. That all changed when horticulturists began to develop a multitude of hybrids between various Heuchera native species.

In 1986, the first Heuchera with colored foliage was introduced. 'Palace Purple' was hybridized from a naturally occurring purple-leafed plant found growing in the southeast United States. An instant sensation, it was chosen Perennial Plant of the Year in 1991.

The race was on. Since then, more than 200 cultivars had been released, and it's not surprising that Heucheras have become one of the most popular perennials in Yakima gardens.

Each year new hybrids are introduced with ever-more flashy leaf shapes and brilliant colors, from light green, gray and pink, to purple and bronze. Leaves can be deeply lobed or extremely ruffled. The blossoms are usually bell-shaped and form on long stalks waving above the plant. Attractive to butterflies and hummingbirds, the flowers can be white, cream, terra cotta, or vermillion, and can grow 3'.

Once you buy one of these beauties, you may find that you can't stop. And with new varieties being added each year, the Heuchera aisle at your favorite nursery may become a frequent destination. Remember, it's not hoarding if it's plants.

Heucheras grow best in morning sun or bright shade. Varieties with darker-colored leaves generally can handle sunnier conditions, while those with golden or yellow leaves are best planted in shade to prevent sun scald. Keep soil moist, but not soggy.

After a few years in the garden, some Heucheras form bare, upright stalks with foliage only on the top. Think palm tree. Fix this by cutting the entire plant down to just about soil level in early March. Add some fertilizer and keep the soil moist. The plant will rejuvenate itself in a few weeks. Don't forget to plant the stem you just removed up to the leaves in shady, moist soil. The entire stem will root, and you'll have another Heuchera to add to your collection.

Even though they can survive the coldest winters, sometimes freezing temperatures will cause roots to heave above the soil surface. Simply dig up the plants and replant them at the proper depth.

You can easily propagate the Heuchera you have by digging up the entire clump in early spring and separating the roots into two or three sections. Replant each division. Or, in late spring or early summer, search the base of the plant for side shoots and carefully dig underneath and use a sharp knife to remove a shoot that has roots. Plant in a new location, keep the soil moist, and you'll soon have new plants.