

## Silver Foliage

by Carol Barany

**T**his summer's heat has been punishing for so many of our perennials. Nonetheless, I've noticed that some plants are absolutely thriving.

Spotted Spurge tops the list. Robust specimens of this tenacious mat-forming weed with a 12" spread have popped up everywhere.

In second place, but gaining rapidly, Field Bindweed has taken over my sorry-excuse-for-a-back-lawn and could be headed down the alley to Franklin Park.

The bronze medal goes to crab grass. It's everywhere.

Telling the difference between a weed and a desirable perennial is something gardeners learn with experience. If you give the questionable plant a gentle tug and it pops out easily, it was a desirable perennial. Sorry about that. If you put all your weight into it and pull to no avail, it's a weed.

It's enough to make a grown gardener cry.

Yet I couldn't help but notice that perennials with silver foliage seemed to be flourishing, looking happy and right at home in the Dog Days of summer.

Some of the most dazzling plants around, they're also some of the toughest. After all, they evolved in the dry, sundrenched areas of the world, including North America's mountains, steppes, and deserts. Here, the green tones of wetter landscapes have been replaced by shimmery greys and silvers.

Dry-land plants are equipped with leaves covered with tiny hairs that reflect solar radiation. Not only do they cool the surface of the leaf by several degrees, but they offer protection from drying winds. The density, color, and length of each hair give each leaf its distinctive hue. Plants can appear grey- or blue-green, pewter, silver, or even ghostly white. As a further adaptation, these leaves are often thin, needle-like, or filigreed, reducing the plant's surface area and yielding less water loss than for plants with big, wide leaves.

Many, including the Mediterranean's silvery sages, artemesias, and lavenders, have highly aromatic foliage, another adaptation helping them stand up to strong sun and long, dry summers. In the heat, the oil in their leaves becomes volatile, producing something like a protective fog around the vulnerable leaf surfaces.

If this current summer has made you interested in xeriscaping (a landscaping method that uses drought-resistant plants and water saving techniques), try some plants with silver foliage. Like any other plants, they'll require regular irrigation in the first year or two, while the root systems they need to pull water from deep within the soil become established.

Xeric plants are low-maintenance, but not maintenance-free. You'll still need to weed, prune, divide, and tidy, but the reward is exuberant beauty in the garden when the mercury climbs and everything else is wilting.

**Stachys byzantina** Lamb's Ears is probably the best known silver foliage plant, and the sage-grey cultivar 'Helene von Stein' is on my 'Top 10 Perennials' list. 'Primrose Heron', with smaller leaves that look like they were cut from thick chartreuse flannel, is also one of my favorites. Both varieties rarely bloom, which is a good thing, because it's all about the foliage, which is sweetly aromatic. Lamb's Ears' soft, furry leaves grow up to 8 inches high and spread out as far as you allow them. All that wooliness offered protection from the searing sun of its native Middle Eastern home. Despite all the downiness, this is one tough perennial. Best used as an accent or filler at the front of the border, it looks spectacular in a wide variety of garden styles.

**Artemisia** This huge plant family includes our native sagebrushes, and members are prized for their lacy and highly aromatic foliage. 'Powis Castle' grows up to 3 feet high and spreads almost as wide, a dense clumper of finely cut silver. 'Valerie Finnis', at 2 feet, has leaves soft as velvet. 'Seafoam' is grown for its curlicue silver foliage and low, mounding habit, making it useful as a groundcover at the front of the garden. 'Silver Brocade', another ground-hugger, weaves itself, like white lace, through neighboring plants.

**Salvia** 'S. argentea' is a biennial with enormous candelabras of white-hooded flowers rising from rosettes of downy silver leaves. 'S. Berggarten', a culinary sage with round gray leaves, is loved by cooks for its fine flavor. Gardeners love it for its foliage and beautiful blue flowers and use it as an ornamental edger. This one grows into a low, compact mound 12" tall and 18" wide.

**Eryngium amethystinum** If you've had your fill of soft, touchable silvers, bring on the bristly barbs of amethyst sea holly. Thistle-like flower heads of metallic blue are surrounded by 2-inch silvery-blue bracts and top tall stems in summer, emerging from a rosette of spiny, deeply cut, grey-green leaves.

There are many other worthy silver possibilities, so visit one of our local nurseries for more great suggestions.