

Garden Colour

THE SMART WAY

The demand for colour in the landscape seems to be the bane of most garden designers and horticulturists alike, it is an unyielding demand and often an impossibility for us to satisfy for our perception of colour may not be in concert with other people's eyes. I cringe when my editor, who is not a gardener (although after many years of association with me she should be and I am sure we will debate this point if this statement is not edited), asks me to write about "getting colour in your garden in a smart way".

Many years ago my friend Darren Schmahl of Copper Leaf Garden Store fame and I were in England visiting gardens and decided to see a much talked about place called Compton Acres. The five hour drive we realized was a mistake when we arrived in the parking lot to find more coaches than cars; it is widely known in horticultural circles that those who visit gardens in coaches, professional conferences aside are not really serious gardeners. After the five hour drive however, we ventured forth and paid our admission to join the queues of blue rinsed, polyester clad, comfortable walking shoe set. What greeted us was to put it mildly, bizarre! In the land where gardeners are born, stately homes and attendant gardens abound and where a book on gardening is written every minute, horticulture, it seems was forgotten in this corner of the country. Masses of perfectly coiffed tuberous begonias, geraniums, zinnias, marigolds, and alyssum greeted us at every turn, it was as if some giant clown had gone berserk with his paint set or had spilled giant tubs of smarties everywhere. This was not colour, heck this was not a garden, this was a visual assault on the eye and mind, destined to ingrain nightmares in the few unsuspecting souls; real gardeners.



A subtle mix of interplanted species in the A.M. (Mac) Cuddy Garden

If a visit to Compton Acres still appeals to you read no further for the rest is for the serious gardener in all of us, where colour subtlety is a benchmark combined with foliage contrast and plant form, where colour and the garden is a moving symphony, a restful, subtle, searching visual appetite for the eye and the soul; not where colour jumps out from every nook and cranny and bludgeons you into senseless senility.

There are many rules for colour in the garden, I have a whole shelf of books dedicated to the topic in the library and I even wrote a chapter on colour for a landscape design manual; however that is now all by the wayside. I have determined that there are no rules for colour; Compton Acres was proof of that, what I saw as 'violent' use of colour was to many an enjoyable experience as testament by the coached filled parking lot. The late Christopher Lloyd of Great Dixter shocked the English gardening crowd many years back when he ripped out the rose garden at the family estate and planted exuberant tropicals, orange cannas, purple verbena and red dahlias, now we crave for it with the grand dame of English gardening style Sissinghurst Gardens using similar plantings; the quintessential statement of acceptance and good colour use in the garden.



Large masses of colour, form and texture, at the Toronto Botanical Gardens, create a complex garden tapestry.

Colour is a matter of eye and acceptance, what is good for one person and garden may not be acceptable elsewhere, I appreciate subtlety and the occasional shock of colour, loose mixes with air between, where colour frames the views and acts as exclamation points in the garden. What does a long red row of perfect geraniums tell you about a garden: It tells you that it is a long red row of geraniums? But, if you took a few of those same geraniums and mixed them with a clump of ornamental grass, a few tall purple verbenas and a bronze phormium you have created a tapestry that requires the viewer to explore further.

When gardeners think of colour we are often drawn to the bloom of the plant, that 10-20% of plant parts is what decides how and why we use it the garden. Look towards the foliage, the change in texture, the shades of green and blue, bark and stems, seed heads and movement. The garden becomes a 'Monet' when all the elements are considered and the bigger picture is composed with minimal reliance on the brightly coloured bits at the end of flower stems.

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Originally published in The London Free Press