

Cotswold Cottage Gardening

Dark Secrets

There is nothing quite like the appeal of dark plants. There is a silky exoticism in the dark blue or maroon irises, the black/crimson of a rose such as 'Barcarole' or 'Louis XVII' which no paler blooms can challenge. It is probably true that they are better admired at close quarters in a vase than as part of the garden display, as they tend to 'vanish' from a distance, leaving what looks like a hole in the surrounding foliage. Dark foliage, on the other hand, does not seem to present this problem, perhaps because as it is a greater mass, the individual leaves display slightly different tones as the breeze moves them. Too many dark plants together can present rather a heavy picture, especially when foliage becomes tired in late summer; but used as accents they bring a uniquely valuable contrast and depth to the garden.

Favourite Dark Beauties

One of my favourite shrubs is *Physocarpus opulifolius* 'Diabolo'. The leaves are a rich purple bronze, slightly reminiscent of ivy in shape. It is quite vigorous, but being one of the rose family, it takes pruning very well (a friend of mine actually stools her plants to obtain bigger leaves). This has the bonus of clusters of pinkish flowers in summer, and even produces small claret berries in a good season.

The cut-leaved elder, *Sambucus nigra* 'Black Lace', launched three years ago seems to present the perfect solution for people like me, who yearn to grow similar acers, but cannot provide them

with the soil and shelter they demand.

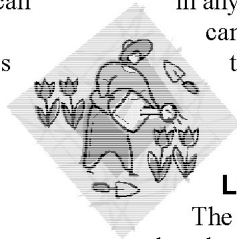
The elder on the other hand seems to be both vigorous and hardy, and looks fabulous against stone, a golden foliage backdrop or even growing as a specimen in a (large) pot.

Rather more humble, but very useful is the annual *Atriplex hortensis* 'Rubra'. This grows to five foot in the space of a season with small dusty purple leaves and magnificent cascades of round, dock like florets, which develop into equally showy chains of seeds, which look magnificent in large flower arrangements. The only disadvantage is its propensity to seed with wild abandon

in any open ground (as the seedlings can easily be tweaked out when

they are a few inches high,

however, I have never let this disconcert me).



Luscious Leaves

The number of dark-leaved heucheras has proliferated amazingly, many of them very good low-growing perennials. They do flower, but rather inconspicuously; it is for the luscious leaves that you grow them. The granddaddy of them all, *H.* 'Palace Purple' is still one of the best, and is almost indestructible; it has the engaging habit of seeding into tiny paving cracks or stair risers, where you could never plant it. The sterile *H.* 'Seven Seas' has big scalloped leaves in shades of purple, *H.* 'Chocolate Ruffles' masses of shiny cocoa brown ones: all making perfect foregrounds to roses or taller, paler-leaved shrubs.

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