

The Dark Side: Plants with Black or Purple Foliage



Plants with dark foliage offer contrast in the garden.

and flowers or to add tend to be usually best used as accent plants where they can be viewed up close, but can also be used as a focal point to highlight other colors in the garden.

Purple foliage combines well with any other colored foliage, including blue, gold and silver, for even more contrast. Putting a plant with dark purple leaves near another with bright chartreuse leaves makes the lighter color really pop. Variegated plants are more striking beside darker colors. Flowers with strong, saturated colors tend to enhance purple foliage, and hot colors really make a statement against the dark leaves which balance



Amaranthus 'Early Splendor'.

Black may be a staple in the fashion world, but isn't quite as ubiquitous in the gardening world. Although true-black plants are a rarity in nature, there are many dark purples, browns and greens that come close to black, and dark cultivars are being introduced at an increasing rate. Most gardens are a sea of green with flowers providing color and foliage offering contrast with different textures. Mixing in plants with dark-colored foliage can really make a difference in the landscape or containers. Of course plants with purple leaves make a great contrast with plants with lighter foliage for visual interest, but dramatic designs can be created with all dark-leaved plants for a very unusual effect.

Dark foliage shows up best in full sun; dark plants in the shade tend to disappear, so it is best to limit their use in shady spots. Incorporating woody plants with dark foliage can create a nice backdrop for other plants



Purple foliage pairs well with brightly colored flowers.

with pastel flower colors add a degree of sophistication and elegance. In a moon garden dark-colored plants add contrast to the silver foliage and white flowers during the day, but at night they virtually disappear so the white pops even more.

There are a plethora of plants – including annuals, herbaceous perennials, and trees and shrubs for nearly every growing condition – with cultivars that offer a change from green. Colors range from nearly true black to bright red, and every shade of purple, maroon, and brown in between.

Annuals

Many types of *Amaranthus* have dark foliage, including 'Hopi Red Dye' and 'Early Splendor' among others, but most tend to lean more toward the red than purple range of colors.

- Purple cultivars of basil (*Ocimum basilicum*), such as 'Opal' or 'Purple Ruffles' have purple to black leaves.
- Ornamental pepper (*Capsicum annuum*) such as 'Black Pearl' and 'Purple Flash' have dark foliage and purple-black fruits.



'Purple Majesty' provides drama in the garden for both color contrast and vertical interest.

■ *Pennisetum glaucum* 'Purple Majesty' is a tall ornamental millet with dark purple leaves that offers vertical interest.

■ Beefsteak plant (*Perilla frutescens*) is an herb in the mint family with ruffled purple with a peppery-basil smell. It can self-sow prolifically if allowed to flower.

■ Several cultivars of castor bean (*Ricinus communis*) have bronze-red or purple leaves, including 'Carmencita Bright Red', 'New Zealand Purple', and 'Red Spire'.

Tender perennials grown as annuals in the Midwest

■ Tropical-looking *Canna* spp. usually have wide, green leaves, but some

cultivars, such as 'Tropicanna Black' and 'Wyoming' have solid purple leaves. 'Black Knight' has black and green leaves with garnet red flowers. 'Red Wine' is a dwarf cultivar with vivid red flowers atop dark-burgundy stems and leaves. 'Phaison' has variegated leaves that start out intense purple but become striped with green, yellow, pink, and red.

■ Some varieties of elephant's ear (*Colocasia esculenta*) have dark foliage, such as 'Black Magic' with matte-black, two-foot long leaves and 'Illustris' with 18-inch leaves of grey-black highlighted with lime green veins and edges.



Colocasia esculenta 'Illustris'.

■ *Hibiscus acetosella* 'Panama Red', 'Red Shield', and others (perennial in zones 8-10) is grown primarily for its striking dark purple-red, serrated leaves rather than its wine colored flowers.

■ The dahlia 'Bishop of Llandaff' has dark mahogany foliage and garnet-red flowers. 'Fascination' has dark foliage and lilac semi-double flowers with yellow stamens. Many other cultivars are offered with dark foliage ranging from brown to purple to black.

■ Several cultivars of sweet potato vine, *Ipomoea batatas*, have dark foliage. 'Blackie' has heart-shaped, deeply notched ebony leaves, while 'Midnight Lace' had sharply lobed,



An ornamental pepper with black leaves and red fruit.



A purple-leaved castor bean plant.



Hibiscus acetocella 'Red Shield'.



'Blackberry Heart' sweet potato vine.

There are numerous cultivars of coleus (*Solenostemon* spp.) with dark foliage ranging from red to very dark purple, in solid colors or variegated in a variety of patterns. Some examples include 'Black Lace', 'Dark Star', 'Fishnet Stockings', 'Inky Fingers', 'Merlot', 'Othello', 'Purple Emperor' or 'Red Ruffles'.

Persian shield (*Strobilanthes dyerianus*) has glossy, pointed dark maroon to purple leaves with colorful veining and a silver sheen to the foliage (zone 10, root hardy maybe to zone 8).



A mass planting of *Strobilanthes dyerianus*.



Alternanthera 'Purple Knight'.

Actaea (= *Cimicifuga*) *simplex* 'Hillside Black Beauty', 'Brunette', and other selected cultivars have large astilbe-like leaves of purple black, and pink bottlebrush flower spikes in early fall (zones 3-9).

glossy purple-black leaves. Many other cultivars also have dark foliage.

Oxalis regnelli var. *triangularis* (often offered as *O. triangularis*) has purple shamrock-shaped leaves and small pink flowers. It is often sold as a houseplant, but can be used as a seasonal plant in the ground (zones 8-11).

Pennisetum purpureum 'Princess Molly' is a purple-foliaged grass (zones 8-10).

Purple fountain grass (*Pennisetum setaceum*) forms clumps of deep purple foliage topped by fluffy light-catching seed-heads. Various cultivars are available.



Wizard® Chocolate coleus.

The tender succulent *Aeonium arboreum* 'Schwartzkopf' or 'Zwartkop' (and various other spellings) has a rosette of glossy leaves so dark purple they appear black (zones 9-10).

Many cultivars of the tropical perennial *Alternanthera dentata* (zone 10), such as 'Purple Knight' are noted for their rich purple to burgundy leaves.



Aeonium arboreum 'Schwartzkopf'.

Herbaceous perennials

Ajuja reptans 'Black Scallop' forms a low carpet of rounded, glossy, purple-black leaves, especially intensely colored in full sun (zones 3-9). 'Burgundy Glow', 'Purple Brocade', and others also have purple or purple-tinged foliage.



Ajuja 'Black Scallop'



Heuchera "Obsidian".



A purple-foiled tall *Sedum* nestles amid green foliage.

Japanese parsley (*Cryptotaenia japonica atropurpurea*) has ruffled purple-black foliage and stems and umbels of tiny white flowers in summer (zones 5-8).

Eupatorium rugosum 'Chocolate' produces mounds of dark bronze-purple leaves with deep purple stems that are a big contrast to the clusters of small white flowers in fall (zones 3-7).

Many *Heuchera* and *Heucherella* cultivars have purple foliage, including 'Amethyst Myst', 'Bressingham Bronze', 'Chocolate Veil', 'Obsidian', 'Plum Pudding' or 'Palace Purple', and many others (zones 4-9).

The new foliage of *Penstemon digitalis* 'Husker Red' is purple, especially in spring (zones 3-8).

A few cultivars of culinary sage (*Salvia officinalis*) have darker foliage.

There are a number of *Sedum* varieties with purple foliage, including 'Bertram Anderson', 'Matrona', 'Morchen', and 'Vera Jameson' (zones 2/3-9).

Trifolium repens 'Atropurpureum' (also called 'Pentaphyllum' or Dark Dancer™) has foliage that is three or four-leaved, dark purple-red with a green margin (zones 4-9).



***Penstemon digitalis* "Huskers Red" in spring.**



***Salvia officinalis* 'Purpurea'.**

Trees and shrubs



The dark foliage of 'Bloodgood' Japanese maple against pink azalea.

Japanese maple, *Acer palmatum* 'Bloodgood' and 'Emperor II', have dark maroon foliage in spring and summer that turns crimson in the fall. Most cultivars of Japanese maple are not reliably hardy in most of Wisconsin, other than these two which are rated as zones 4-8. Other less hardy cultivars can be grown as container plants to overwinter in a protected area.

Purple Leaf Sand Cherry, *Prunus x cisterna*, is an upright deciduous shrub that can be trained as a small tree. It has reddish purple foliage that retains good color throughout the summer (zones 2-8).

Smokebush or smoketree (*Cotinus coggygria*) 'Royal Purple', is an



***Cotinus coggygria* 'Royal Purple'.**



Physocarpus opulifolius 'Diabolo'.

upright, multi-stemmed, deciduous shrub or small tree with dark red-purple leaves that turn scarlet in fall (zones 5-9). 'Velvet Cloak' is another cultivar with deep purple foliage that turns orange-red in autumn.

■ Eastern ninebark (*Physocarpus opulifolius*) 'Diabolo' or 'Diablo', has deep burgundy foliage that becomes almost black by midsummer and clusters of pink-tinged white flowers in late spring (zones 3-7).

■ Elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*) Black Beauty™, is a deciduous shrub with deep rich purple dissected foliage and pink flowers in spring, followed by edible purplish black berries (zones 4-8). 'Black Lace'

■ *Weigela florida* Wine and Roses® is a deciduous shrub with reddish-pink flowers in spring and purple foliage (zones 4-8).

And if dark foliage isn't enough, try adding some "black" flowers to the mix, such as:

■ *Aquilegia vulgaris* var. *stellata* 'Black Barlow', a columbine that was bred especially for cut flower production, with fully double, purplish black, spurless blossoms that resemble small dahlias.

■ *Iris chrysographes*, with reddish violet to dark violet flowers.

■ Black petunias, such as 'Black Velvet' and the black and yellow or white 'Phantom' and 'Pinstripe.'

■ Tulip 'Black Parrot' and 'Queen of Night' are some of the "black" tulips that are really a deep purple.

■ *Viola* 'Bowles Black' has velvety purple flowers, as do other cultivars such as 'Black Moon' and 'Black Prince'.

■ 'Black Forest' calla (*Zantedeschia aethiopica*) has shiny, deep purple flowers with dark red edging.



'Black Velvet' petunia.

– Susan Mahr, University of Wisconsin - Madison

Additional Information:

■ The book *Black Magic and Purple Passion* by Karen Platt

■ The book *Black Plants* by Paul Bonnie