



Trowel Talk

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Big, Bold and Beautiful Plants in Your Garden

Nancy McDonald

When I think of big plants in a garden, I envision plants of stature starting at 1 metre in height and extending 1.8 to 2.4 metres. When I say bold plants, I may be referring to form, texture, colour or something totally unexpected. And beautiful is always in the eye of the beholder. There is room in every garden for statuesque plant beauties.

“Whoa, hold on there,” you say. Maybe your garden space is small, and you think you can’t accommodate these big plants. This is where you take the principles of interior design outside. We are told in interior design to incorporate large pieces of furniture in a smaller room. If we limit ourselves to small pieces only, we end up with a cluttered looking space. When working with a small garden space, keep the planting design simple and use big plants for maximum interest.

One difference from interior to exterior is that endless vertical space outside. So, let’s think of opportunities for big, bold and beautiful plants in garden design.

Immediately, a layered garden opportunity in mixed and herbaceous flower beds comes to mind. We have all seen those magazine photos of step-down plant layers from 1.8 metres to 1.2 metres to .6 me-

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Sunflower

Nancy McDonald

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tres, and so on. Just keep in mind that these photos might have been staged, or computer enhanced for effect. If you decide to do a layered planting, be sure to leave space around plants to both show foliage and allow the plants to collect light for photosynthesis.



Persicaria polymorpha
Nancy McDonald

What is trending now and quite aesthetically pleasing is to have a variety of plant heights throughout the flower bed. This allows interest as your eyes travel through the plantings and encounter elements of visual surprise. Plants with a narrow habit like *Eremurus* (foxtail lily), *Rudbeckia laciniata* (cut leaf coneflower), *Veronicastrum virginicum* (Culver's root), *Thalictrum* spp. (meadow rue) and *Liatris* spp. (blazing star) work well to give those vertical elements.

A tip to help you visualize height variations in your garden bed is to take a picture and then view it in

Ask a Master Gardener

Compiled by Amanda Carrigan and Ann McQuillan

Master Gardeners answer helpline questions.

I feel like my garden doesn't have much in bloom in the late summer and fall, and I'd like more colour. What can I plant that flowers late in the growing season?

I don't know your garden's conditions, so it's hard to recommend plants that might suit a specific site. Annuals, such as marigolds and salvias, will flower until frost. Grasses add movement and texture. Other plants provide nice berries or good fall leaf colour. All add interest to a fall garden.

Here are some suggestions for plants that flower late in the season:

Perennials: Consider Japanese anemones, several types of asters, goldenrods, hardy chrysanthemums, pink turtlehead (*Chelone lyonii* or *C. obliqua*), tall coreopsis (*Coreopsis tripteris*), some blue perennial geraniums such as the cultivar 'Rozanne', sneezeweed (*Helenium*), rough blazing star (*Liatris aspera*), reblooming or late-season daylilies, Russian sage (*Perovskia*), downy skullcap (*Scutellaria incana*), tall Sedum cultivars such as 'Autumn Joy', toad lily (*Tricyrtis*), autumn crocus, and some monkshoods such as *Aconitum carmichaelii*. These last plant choices are toxic however, so may not be a great choice if you have kids or pets.

Shrubs: Possibilities include *Hibiscus moscheutos* (a large perennial that dies back overwinter), native witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*), panicle hydrangeas (which start blooming earlier, but hold their blooms well into fall), and potentilla shrubs (*Dasiphora fruticosa*) which will bloom until frost. If you have a sheltered place, a couple of shrubs that are slightly tender for this region are *Hibiscus syriacus* cultivars such as 'Blue Bird' and seven sons tree (*Heptacodium miconioides*). The latter has

black and white. In that way, your eyes are not distracted by colour and can clearly see height variations among the plantings.

When using big bold plants, focus on contrast as a design element by interspersing fine-textured plants such as *Coreopsis* spp. (tickseed), *Amsonia hubrichtii* (thread leaf blue star) or *Verbena bonariensis* (tall verbena) as examples. Fine-textured plants act to bind together the elements of the larger, showier, plants and provide needed contrast. This allows the beauty of both plants' foliage to be seen and textural contrast will be appreciated.



Crocosmia 'Lucifer' (red flowers), *Veronica* spp. (lower left), *Amsonia hubrichtii* (foreground, right)
Nancy McDonald

A big, bold and beautiful plant can add sculptural and architectural interest. *Acanthus mollis* (bear's breeches), whose leaves are used extensively in Greek and Roman art, will lend a classical air to your garden. *Allium x proliferum* (Egyptian walking onions) are a sculptural element in my herb garden. Gertrude Jekyll used *Yucca* as an architectural plant in her gardens. *Rodgersia podophylla* is a very striking architectural plant which adds tropical drama to a garden. *Aruncus dioicus* (goat's beard) with its shrub-like appearance provides colour and interest in a shade garden. *Polygonatum* (Solomon's seal) and *Crocosmia* 'Lucifer', I consider architectural plants in my garden. Even *Filipendula rubra* (queen of the prairie) is an archi-

beautiful white flowers in summer, followed by showy reddish seedheads.

Consider a visit to a nursery or a public garden in early fall to see what is in bloom. You can still buy plants and plant them this season. However, try to do it before mid-September. This way, they have time to establish before freeze-up.

Help! There are so many earwigs in my garden, and they are eating my plants. What's the best way to deal with them?

Earwigs, interestingly, can be considered beneficial as they are omnivorous and eat garden pests, as well as plants. However, if they are causing too much damage, you will want to reduce their population. Earwigs are largely nocturnal. They like cool, dark, damp hiding places to shelter in during the day, such as under pots, and in mulch or leaf litter, so take advantage of this fact. Many DIY earwig trap ideas involve making a tube or hiding place of some form (e.g. using lengths of garden hose or small boxes), placing them near the plants affected, and emptying the traps each morning into a bucket of soapy water. If some plants are badly affected, you could sprinkle diatomaceous earth on and around the plant, as the earwigs dislike it. 🌿

tectural marvel when its cloudlike blooms rise in the landscape.

If you have a big, bold, beautiful plant, one may be enough and give you the opportunity to showcase as a specimen plant. The natural growth habit of these plants defines them as a specimen plant. What makes them stand out may come from foliage, flower shapes or stems. They can act as a focal point or a dramatic statement. *Rheum palmatum* (ornamental rhubarb) when in flower can reach 1.8 metres. Its majestic beauty should be given space to allow the viewer to appreciate the leafy layers. It's worthwhile waiting the second year for the biennial *Salvia sclarea* (clary sage) to flower, another



stand-alone beauty. Perennial *Hibiscus moscheutos* are slow to emerge in our Ottawa spring but their giant, plate-sized blooms are showstoppers in late summer.



Ornamental Rhubarb

Mary Ann Van Berlo

Remember, some big, bold and beautiful plants are North American native plants and excellent to have in our home gardens. *Eutrochium maculatum* (Joe Pye weed) comes to mind as a butterfly and pollinator magnet. It needs space to grow but is very useful to soften hardscape or even as an informal hedging. *Agastache foeniculum* (anise hyssop), *Echinacea purpurea* (purple coneflower), asters, *Solidago* (goldenrod), *Asclepias* (milkweed), *Baptisia australis* (blue false indigo), *Ratibida pinnata* (gray headed coneflower) and *Lobelia siphilitica* (blue lobelia) are a few of the larger native plants in my garden.

Big plants can be used as camouflage to provide privacy or block an unsightly view. Vines such as Clematis are an example of beauties that add a vertical interest in your garden and increase drama to an otherwise plain fence. Big plants can also be used to define garden spaces or create rooms. Think of sunflowers *Helianthus* spp. (which includes both annuals and perennials) as an example, and which effectively created an ornamental divider in a friend's garden.

Big, bold and beautiful plants can be edibles in your garden. *Levisticum officinale* (lovage) is a wonderful tall perennial herb with umbel flowers. Its leaves

and stems impart celery flavour to soups, stews and casseroles and I always add it to potato salad. There are large kale varieties such as Redbor, Black Magic and Red Volants that are both edible and bold in your garden landscape.

By happy coincidence, some of my neighbours and I have planted peonies *Paeonia* spp., in our small front yard gardens. These beauties come into bloom at the same time. This repetition in the streetscape is a visual delight – something to remember when considering how our gardens individually and collectively add to neighbourhood enjoyment.



Lady Borden peony

Nancy McDonald

Might there be room for a new big, bold and beautiful addition to your garden? 🌱

“A perfect summer day is when the sun is shining, the breeze is blowing, the birds are singing, and the lawn mower is broken” —James Dent , author of Hops and History: American History and Folklore as Remembered by American Breweries and Beers

Good King Henry Herb

Nancy McDonald



Good King Henry

Susan Bicket

Was it the name Good King Henry that first interested me in growing *Blitum bonus-henricus* (formerly, *Chenopodium bonus-henricus*)? Did I want a whimsical name as part of my herb garden? Well, I admit, it was the name that first caught my interest but as I researched this ancient pot herb, I realized it has culinary possibilities.

Good King Henry is native in Europe and came to North America with early settlers as a pot herb. It belongs to the amaranth family and is described as a goosefoot plant because of the triangular shaped leaves, resembling a goose's foot. It is known by many common names— poor man's asparagus, Lincolnshire spinach, fat hen and perennial goosefoot, to name a few. It was a nutritious food source in the past, providing iron, calcium and vitamin C. Indeed,

it was felt to have kept scurvy away for many of the population as it was so readily available.

This perennial herb reaches 60-90 cm in height at maturity. It is easily grown in fertile soil and prefers a sun to part sun location. While it does not want to be waterlogged, a site where the soil does not completely dry out is preferred. Adding compost material annually and being attentive to watering as needed during periods of drought will ensure success. Powdery mildew can be avoided if plants are not crowded together. It is recommended not to harvest more than a few leaves in its first season.

You can expect the shoots and leaves to appear as soon as the ground has warmed up in early spring, which is when they taste best. As this is a new herb for me, and a young plant, so far, I have used small amounts in soups and frittatas. I tend to use it as I would spinach and I enjoy the taste better cooked than raw. Perhaps this is because cooking reduces the oxalic acid contained in the leaves. I have read that the flowers can be sautéed in butter and that the seeds can be ground and mixed with flour when making bread. Being a bread baker, I plan to try this for sure. Something to note – seeds should be soaked in water overnight and then thoroughly rinsed to remove saponin. We are familiar with thoroughly washing quinoa before using to remove the bitter tasting saponin and with Good King Henry we need to do the extra soaking step.

This is just my second season of growing Good King Henry, and I am exploring its possible culinary uses. I recognize that I will have to contend with early bolting when we get unusually high temperatures as we had this spring which causes the plant to go to flower and set seed, thus limiting my harvest. However, so far, my experience has been positive. I have even frozen some of the leaves for winter use. I only keep herbs in my garden if they provide delight in my kitchen. My hopes remain high for Good King Henry to be both useful and delightful. 🌱

Can You Hear the Garden? – The Gardener’s Sense of Sound

Claire McCaughey



Large bed of mixed grasses and *Gaillardia*
Claire McCaughey

Sound is the sense that is least obviously linked to the garden. Perhaps because it has less of the immediacy of the other senses (smell, sight, taste, touch). Sounds are often noticed when we slow down and pay attention, and when there are no other distractions. Our busy lives may mean that we miss the sounds of nature in the garden, which is unfortunate as there is so much to hear. Sounds are a reminder of the larger environment outside of our own gardens; we hear much more than we can see. Scientists increasingly use audio recorders to understand ecosystems by listening to them (a field called bioacoustics). The sound of bird calls in the garden is delightful, as is the effect of the wind blow-

ing through dried leaves or grasses. A water feature or pond with the sound of moving water is very soothing. It is no wonder many audio apps and devices to help with sleep use sounds from nature.

The Sound of Leaves and Grasses

A windy or stormy summer day can create wonderful sounds of leaves moving. During a storm, I like nothing better than sitting on our veranda and listening to the sound of rain, wind and tree branches moving. Some sounds of leaves blowing in the wind can continue even into winter. From the first fall when I first started gardening, I have a vivid recollection of the sound of dead oak leaves still at-

tached to a tree and the unique rustling sound that the leaves made. At the time I did not know that most species of *Quercus* (oak) trees hold on to their leaves all winter (technical term - leaf marcescence), as do several other genera of trees including *Fagus* (beech) and *Hamamelis* (witch hazel). This is an unusual natural phenomenon; almost all other deciduous trees drop their dead leaves in the fall (technical term - leaf abscission).



Dried oak leaves in the garden

Claire McCaughey

My neighbour has a species of oak tree that loses most of its leaves in winter (I have not identified which species yet). Whether they remain attached to the tree in winter or not, oak leaves have crispy dried texture that also makes them rustle on the ground with a distinctive sound. Another sound associated with my neighbour's oak tree is that of acorns falling on our deck.

More subtle than the sound of oak leaves, clumps of ornamental grasses such as *Panicum virgatum* (switchgrass), *Chasmanthium latifolium* (northern sea oats), and *Molinia caerulea* subsp. *arundinacea* 'Skracer', all of which I have in my garden, make soft whispering sounds when the wind blows.

Some taller perennials in my garden with narrow leaves such as *Amsonia hubrichtii* (Hubricht's bluestar) and *Sanguisorba officinalis* (great burnet) also have a similar sound when blown in the wind especially late in the season when the foliage is almost dried. An overgrown lawn or grassy area of a park can create the same lovely sound effect, something to consider as the idea of rewilding (returning an ecosystem to its natural state) has captured the interest of those who care about the environment.

Spending quiet time in the garden is also a wonderful way to get to know the sounds made by different resident and visiting birds, small animals, and insects. I especially enjoy early morning in the garden as that is when I can be most attentive to sound, sitting still with a cup of coffee in my hand.

Sound vs. Noise

While bells and windchimes are beautiful to listen to for short periods outdoors especially when there is no competing sound, your neighbours may not always appreciate them as much as you do! I do have both bells and windchimes in my garden and they were carefully chosen so as not to be loud. On very windy days I have even taken them down.

The worst garden noises are those of garden equipment such as gas mowers, leaf blowers (the worst), and chainsaws. In my opinion, they are pure noise pollution even if they are labour-saving. On the other hand, the sound of a push reel lawn mower, a rake pulling up leaves into a pile in the fall or a hand saw cutting up a branch is pleasant by contrast.

The Garden as a Meditative Space

It is not possible to block out all noise of people, music, traffic, and construction (of which there is a lot in my neighbourhood) from your garden oasis. However, focusing on the gentle sounds of nature in the garden provides a space for reflection and even meditation. Consider spending just a few minutes every day paying attention to the various sounds in the garden. You will be surprised at what you hear.

This article is the last in the series Five Sense Gardening. 🌿

Know Your Weeds: Annual Sow Thistle—*Sonchus oleraceus*

Mary Crawford



Sow thistle shoots up fast, including within this rose plant

Mary Crawford



The leaves on spiny sow thistle are thicker and have more teeth along the margins.

Mary Crawford

Botanical name: *Sonchus oleraceus*.

Other common names: Smooth sow thistle, milk thistle, hare's lettuce. Botanically, it is not a thistle and has no spines or thorns but takes its common name from the tiny teeth that emerge along the leaf margins. "Sow" and "milk" are from the pervasive white sap that fills the stem cavity.

Family relation: Closely related to the smooth sow thistle is the spiny sow thistle (*S. asper*), which is similar in most respects except that the leaves are thicker and the teeth more intense.

Origin: Eurasia, North Africa.

Reason for introduction: Mixed in with the hay, straw, and plants brought by settlers.

Life cycle: Annual.

Means of propagation: Solely by seed, aided in wind dispersion by a pappus of white fuzz.

Nature of the problem: Annual sow thistle has the dubious distinction of being on the Ontario Noxious Weeds list. It is a major crop contaminant for farmers. Growing quickly to maturity, it spreads seed and germinates continually throughout the growing

season. It is host to insect pests such as aphids and leaf miners as well as disease-producing fungi including powdery mildew.

For many gardeners, the appearance of this plant with its toothy leaves and mini-dandelion-shaped yellow flowers, quickly followed by fluffy seed heads, is cause to run for the digger. For some of us, the competition is not so much for the nutrients, light and water it consumes as it is simply for the visual impact. We think: “That’s not the look I was going for!” And there it is, popping up repeatedly over the course of spring, summer and fall.

What to do about it: In the garden, sow thistle requires constant vigilance. It is not difficult to pull from the soil, but seed escapes easily, sending the plant into a new cycle of life.

If you’re so inclined, this plant, like the others in this

series thus far, is edible. Catch the sow thistle during a rainy spring and you could enjoy “sowsparagus”— stems of growing tips chock-full of nutrients looking much as their nickname suggests. Cooking helps reduce the bitterness.

If sow thistle lacks the cuteness of chickweed and the pleasing proximity to spinach or lambsquarters, it doesn’t lack for popularity among the pollinators, especially beneficial syrphid flies that find the flowers worthy of attention. 🌱

“Many things grow in the garden that were never sown there.” —Thomas Fuller, English physician and writer, 1608-1661



Gardeners’ Beware: Oriental Bittersweet – *Celastrus orbiculatus*

Gail Labrosse



Bittersweet
Anita O’Connell

Oriental bittersweet is a perennial vine with spectacular colours in the autumn – yellow leaves and golden capsules that pop open to display brightly coloured red-orange seeds. Florists and homemak-

ers use these vines in wreaths and other fall decorations.

Birds and wild animals are also attracted to the colourful seed-containing capsules, called arils. In this way, the seeds are being spread to new locations where they start new colonies. This perennial vine is one of the worst invasive plants in both Canada and the United States.

In the 1860s, this native of eastern Asia was introduced to North America as an ornamental and erosion control plant. It thrives in both shade and full sun. When it escapes cultivation, it spreads rapidly through woods, meadows, grasslands, roadsides and dunes. Oriental bittersweet has many aggressive characteristics but it kills trees by blocking sunlight and by strangling them. It is now found in seven provinces and 33 states. Prince Edward Island is currently battling Oriental bittersweet in multiple locations.

Identification Guidelines:

- Leaves – alternate, round with finely toothed edges
- Flowers – greenish/yellow with five petals, in bunches all along the stem at the leaf axils
- Female plants – yield bright red fruit with orange outer leaves called bracts
- Vines – grow up to 18m on large trees
- Oriental bittersweet is poisonous



Oriental bittersweet vine and fruit, Arkona ON

Elizabeth Warner

On a late autumn drive, it is lovely to see the gold and crimson of Oriental bittersweet vines, but this beauty becomes a beast when it competes with a native woody plant like the rare American bittersweet (*C. scandens*) for sunlight and space. It may also hybridize with the native bittersweet, compromising its genetic purity.



Oriental bittersweet autumn colour

Elizabeth Warner

Consider This Alternative: Jackman Clematis (*Clematis x jackmanii*), is a climbing vine that grows 3 – 4 metres in length. It requires full sun. Its roots need mulch or shade. It will flower in late summer in velvety, dark purple. Cultivars come in other colours.

Major Source: <http://peiinvasives.com/oriental->

Tip: Seeds need to ripen on the plant to be viable, but it can sometimes be difficult to harvest them before they are dispersed or eaten. Cut off a generous corner of a used teabag, empty out the tea leaves, dry. Place the bag over the seed head and use the attached string to hold the bag in place on the plant. The bag should catch the seeds before they fall to the ground. The seeds can then be dried and stored in labelled paper envelopes.

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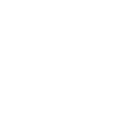
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Send questions and photos of garden pests, diseases or plants for Identification.

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This is your chance, as a reader, to suggest an idea for an article you would like to see in Trowel Talk. Click on the button.



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Banner Photograph: . Goldenrod—*Solidago canadensis*, S. R. Bicket



Clinics

Ask a Master Gardener, face to face, gardening questions.

Almonte Market: 8:30 am—12:30 pm
Saturday, August 20

Barrhaven Market, 10:00 am –2:00 pm
Sunday, August 28, September 11

Carp Farmers Market & Garlic Festival
8:00 am –1:00 pm
Saturday, August 20, 27, September 3, 10

Main Street Farmers Market, 9:00 am –2:00 pm
Saturday, September 3



Talks and Events

For information on gardening in and around the Ottawa valley:

<https://gardeningcalendar.ca/>

See below for upcoming talks by Master Gardeners for garden clubs and horticultural societies. If you wish to attend please contact the host organization to confirm venue and guest fees . Zoom or other virtual meeting software is still in use by some societies.



Ottawa Farmers Market, 9:00 am –1:00 pm
Sunday, September 4, 25

Perth Farmers Market, 8:00 am –1:00 pm
Saturday, August 20, September 3

Westboro Market, 9:00 am—1:00 pm
Saturday, August 27, September 3, 10

Garden Groaner



Wednesday, September 7, 7 pm
Rebecca Last

Preserving the Harvest

[Greely Gardeners Group](#)

Virtual

Tuesday, September 13, 7 pm

Mary Shearman Reid

Another Gardening Year Behind Us

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Trowel Talk Live - Wednesdays at 12:30pm on Zoom

August 17, Renovating a Weedy Patch
Amanda Carrigan

August 24, Introducing Light and Magic
Judith Cox

August 31, Learning as You Grow!
Andrea Knight

September 7, Cold Frames for a Longer Gardening
Season
Odette McIntyre

September 14, Garden Mums: a Fall Staple!
Denise Bonomo

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