

## Under Utilized Perennials

My last few columns have focused on our tendency to overuse certain landscape plants. While being in danger of beating the proverbial “dead horse,” I will focus one more time on a group of under utilized plants; specifically perennials. A perennial is a plant that has the ability to live for more than two growing seasons. They are useful because most have beautiful flowers and many also have interesting foliage. In fact, perennials can be found that will grow anywhere in your yard, except for maybe the cement driveway.

A visit to local production nurseries would reveal that the vast majority of perennials they grow are a relatively low number of species and varieties. This again is due to the fact that we have become very familiar with certain plants and are often unwilling to venture into the unknown. These companies, to stay in business, are almost forced to grow these particular plants even though there are many others suitable for use in the landscape.

One common mistake many consumers make when purchasing perennials is the tendency to buy whatever is in flower. This impulse shopping almost always creates a situation where all the different perennials purchased bloom during the same period of time, leaving very little interest in the yard for the rest of the growing season. To avoid this problem, purchase from a local bookstore or borrow a book from the library about perennials and research what plants may be useful to you in your yard. This will allow you to also get past such common and overused perennials such as Shasta daisies. Other useful information can also be gleaned from these books. For example, most will state if a plant prefers full sun or shade and whether it is drought tolerant or not. Many of these books also give specific information on other perennials that will grow well and look aesthetically pleasing together in the landscape. Some of the more useful books I have personally found have been printed by the American Horticultural Society, Ortho and Sunset Gardens. Although these books have good information, there are also other publishers that have great books on the subject.

Some of the best places to find less common perennials are at local garden centers. The Farmers’ Market also features many vendors who specialize in under utilized species. If needed, a trip into the Wasatch Front where some larger nurseries exist may also be useful. However, support our local companies and vendors whenever possible.

Some less common perennials that I have found to be easy to grow include autumn joy sedum, columbine, balloon flower, and perennial geraniums. Autumn joy sedum is a succulent that grows to eighteen inches high and wide. It maintains a polished look through the growing season and blooms in the fall when most other plants are not. Columbines are adaptable to both sun and shade as long as areas with reflected heat are avoided. They bloom from spring into early summer, are available in multiple colors and often are self sowing. Balloon flower, on the other hand, bloom from mid summer into fall. They require an average amount of moisture and are available in white, pink and blue forms. There are literally dozens of varieties of perennial geraniums available and

they vary in bloom time and overall height. Some bloom in the spring while others prefer to bloom towards mid summer. All have foliage that adds interest in the landscape once established. Unfortunately, most perennial geraniums do not have the most pristine look when sold in a pot and are avoided by many consumers.

As with past articles, I have not included a comprehensive list of available perennials. Do a little research and have fun finding less common plants to use in your yard.