

Color in the Garden: Red

by Lucy Hardiman

When Mother Nature plays the role of drama queen she employs the color red to focus our attention. In our temperate corner of the natural world red appears as a scintillating eye-catcher. A high mountain meadow is transformed in early summer when scarlet Indian Paintbrush blooms like jewels on a carpet of green foliage. Autumn brings deciduous trees festooned with red leaves and in winter the low rays of the sun back illuminate the deep brick colored stems of red twig dogwoods and willows.

Taking our cue from nature most gardeners tend to use red sparingly or not at all. Feeling unsure of how to use red shouldn't keep us from experimenting with this vibrant and exuberant color. Touches of red, a primary color, create contrast when paired with green its opposite on the color wheel. Vermilion red tulips sparkle like jewels in the clear, fresh light of spring while silky, shiny scarlet poppies conjure up images of early summer in grandma's garden. Smoky crimson dahlias add spice to the late summer garden. The onset of cooler nights and shorter days ignites the foliar fireworks of fall. As the mantle of winter settles over the garden, candy-apple red holly berries and rose hips glow like red-hot embers in the soft grey light.

Culturally we view red as the color of power and passion, excitement and danger. Red is bold and provocative evoking a gamut of emotions. Stop signs warn of impending danger issuing a command that, if ignored, can have devastating consequences. A predominantly red neck-tie is considered a "power tie" signifying a potent personality. A gift of red roses from an admirer or spouse connotes romance and ardor. When I was

in junior high school, seemingly a lifetime ago, girls were forbidden from wearing red dressed to dances for fear of overly stimulating the boys.

In the tropics, where the harsh, bright sunlight fades even the strongest colors, red is a dominant color, acting as a beacon among the verdant and lush foliage, drawing birds and insects and ensuring that flowers are pollinated. Although our northwest winters are rainy and colored a "paler shade of grey" we forget that our summers are warm and dry. Pastel colors have a tendency to bleach out and recede under the more intense sun of a typical Northwest summer. The stronger fiesta colors, red orange and gold-yellows have more staying power than the traditional pink, pale yellow and blue palette. In the temperate climate of the Northwest it is red flowers that lure hummingbirds into our gardens. Throughout the summer hummingbirds easily identify red flowers seeking out Fuchsias, Crocosmias, Lobelias and Monardas as nectar sources. In the winter the birds are lured into the garden to feast on red berries which aids and abets in the natural dissemination of seeds.

Of all the colors in the gardener's palette, red is the most brazen and bold. Red flowers and foliage look like exclamation points in a sea of green. Flowers of blood red, ruby, vermilion, and scarlet draw the eye into the garden fore-shortening the distance making them appear closer. Red is perceived as a hot or torrid color warming up surrounding colors. Adding a touch of red to a bed or border creates visual tension. Too much red seem too dominant and overwhelming depending on the foliage and flower colors of companion plants. The large, dense flower forms of red roses, Cannas and Dahlias read as flashy and brash while the small flowers of Potentillas, Heucheras or Helianthemums appear as small gems in a sea of green leaves.

Dark red foliage, objects and flowers absorb light rather than reflecting it. A red gazing ball on a pedestal tucked into a border immediately pulls demands our attention appearing closer than it is. Red chairs nestled into the edge of a bed filled with deep burgundy-red foliage warm up the garden creating an illusion of intimacy inviting us to sit and linger. Red flowers and foliage are most effective placed at mid-border where

they are backlit by the late afternoon sun. Red loses its impact in the shady areas of the garden appearing dark and gloomy.

True red is a highly saturated color. When red is mixed with another color it becomes something different. Red combined with blue creates purple while red blended with yellow makes orange. White mixed with red produces pink. A monochromatic red border can include shades ranging from scarlet to deep burgundy and black those reds that are on the blue side. Red can also be the starting point for a sunset palette starting with crimson and transitioning to copper, russet, bronze and melon colors that have more yellow tints. Red is also striking when incorporated with a range of pinks ranging from magenta, a blue-pink, to fuchsia and raspberry.

If your garden feels flat and colorless in the heat of summer, an infusion of red can add visual excitement and drama.

Plant Recommendations for Red

Perennials:

Potentilla 'Gibson's Scarlet'
Dahlia 'Bishop of Llandaff'
Crocsmia 'Lucifer'
Canna 'Red Futurity'
Canna 'The President'
Hemerocallis 'American Folklife'
Lychnis chalcidonica
Achillea 'Red Beauty'
Geum 'Mrs. Bradshaw'
Lobelia 'Queen Victoria'
Lobelia x speciosa 'Deep Red Complement'
Clematis 'Niobe'
Clematis 'Sunset'
Clematis 'Ville de Lyon'
Fuschia 'Caledonia'
Penstemon 'Ruby'
Penstemon 'Garnet'
Penstemon 'Razzle Dazzle'
Monarda 'Gardenview Scarlet'
Phlox 'Starfire'
Astilbe x arendsii 'Fanal'
Helianthemum 'Dazzler'
Heuchera 'Northern Fire'
Papaver 'Turken Louis'

Phygelius x rectus 'Devil's Tears'
Paeonia 'America'

Roses:

Rosa 'Red Glory'
Rosa 'Prospero'
Rosa 'Courageous'
Rosa 'William Shakespeare'
Rosa 'Eye Opener'
Rosa 'Dublin Bay' climber
Rosa 'Altissimo' climber
Rosa 'Don Juan' climber

Annuals:

Salvia greggii 'Maraschino Cherry'
Impatiens
Begonias
Pelargonium
Petunia
Portulaca 'Sundae Red'
Antirrhinum 'Crimson Sonnet'
Verbena
Zinnias