

Color in the Garden: Yellow

by Lucy Hardiman

From the center of our universe, that great golden orb, the sun, bombards the earth with its warmth and radiant yellow light. Even the darkest, dullest Northwest day is transformed when the bright rays of the sun unexpectedly peek through the heavy cloud cover momentarily casting a yellow aura on our gardens.

For gardeners, yellow evokes the promise of spring even as the branches of the winter blooming witch hazels glow in shades of butter, primrose and lemon-yellow illuminating the stark and subdued winter garden. Yellow hued daffodils, tulips, forsythia, basket of gold and the fresh yellow-green hues of newly emerging foliage are the hallmarks of the spring garden. Summer gardens heat up when yellow roses, daylilies, trumpet lilies, lupine and yarrow burst into bloom echoing the intensity of the sun high overhead. Autumn light, infused with gold tints, has a depth and richness that enhances the burnished yellow-gold of black-eyed Susan's, sunflowers and goldenrod. In autumn the sun is lower in the sky, its angled rays back lighting the translucent yellow and gold leaves as they change color, signaling the continuation of the seasonal cycle.

Perceived as a happy, cheerful color, yellow makes us feel good, hence the expression “mellow yellow” and the archetypal smiley face. Ancient cultures worshiped yellow in the guise of the sun while Christian angels are surrounded by a yellow or gold halo. School buses and cautionary highway and street signs painted bright yellow in order to be readily recognized alert us that we need to be careful and prudent. Dorothy followed the “yellow brick road” on her journey to and from the Land of Oz while the “Yellow Rose of Texas” was memorialized in song. Walls painted yellow imbue interior spaces with a subtle, warm radiant ambiance that captures the essence of natural sunlight.

A primary color along with blue and red, yellow reflects more light than any other color causing it to appear luminous and bright even in the shadiest of situations. Yellow and green variegated plants can be used to great effect to create luminosity in shady spaces. Even in the darkest shade the yellow speckled leaves of *Aucuba japonica* 'Crotonifolia' glitter and gleam in the understory. Hostas with yellow-green foliage hold their color throughout most of the summer adding sparkle to beds and borders or can be grown in a containers situated on a shady terrace or deck.

Hakonechloa macra 'Aureola', the Japanese forest grass, with a soft, recumbent form and brilliant yellow stripes can be used to electrify a partially shaded border.

Yellow is also the first color visible to the human eye. A drift of yellow daylilies surrounded by darker blooms and foliage immediately commands our attention, seeming to stand out among the more somber colors. A swath of yellow daffodils or clump of yellow variegated Japanese ribbon grass reads as a bright pool in the midst of darker foliage and flower. Yellow foliage or flowers situated in the middle or back of the border act as a beacon drawing us into garden foreshortening the distance and focusing the eye. Large masses of yellow at the front edge of a bed can be overwhelming interrupting

Yellow, considered a hot color, is across from violet, a secondary color, on the color wheel. The most vivid color contrasts in the garden occur when you pair foliage or flowers in colors that are opposites on the color wheel. Considered complimentary colors, the deep violet flower spikes of *Salvia* 'May Night', a cool color, appear more intense and visually exciting when combined with the hot sulfur yellow heads of *Achillea* 'Moonshine', a yarrow with soft gray foliage. Vignettes composed of yellow and blue or yellow and lavender flowers create less intense contrasts.

Yellow and green, harmonious colors, are next to each other on the color wheel and are always compatible companions fusing hot with cool color values. Orange, a color derived from mixing red and yellow, is also adjacent to yellow and can be used to link yellow and red in a sunset colored border.

A monochromatic yellow border relies on texture and form to provide visual contrast and define the parameters of the garden. Tale spires of yellow lupine juxtaposed in front of a fully double

yellow rose underplanted with lady's mantle combines very different flower forms and leaf textures, allowing us to focus on the details without the distraction of blocks of other color.

A garden that feels flat and dull can be enhanced by the addition of plants with yellow flowers or foliage. Be brave—take Dorothy's advice and “follow the yellow brick road” right on into the garden.