Sally Harman

2/10/2021

**PLANTING FOR GARDEN DAY**

When one of my fellow members of the Rappahannock Valley Garden Club asked me to give a program on planting for Garden Day, I thought--I’m sure the members of this club could write a treatise on the subject! There is so much gardening experience represented in the GCV!

That said, I have been planning and planting for Garden Day at clients’ homes and for club arrangements for the past six tours. Though I have been working in the horticulture industry since my first job at a garden center 25 years ago, planting for one spring event proved a worthy challenge.

All of us know how difficult it is to get a plant to bloom or perform exactly when and how you want it to with the whims of livings things and our unpredictable weather. Winters have been all over the place lately: one year record-breaking cold, and then so mild that Camellia japonica and spring-blooming Magnolia flowers have lasted weeks without damage. So many flowering plants respond to seasonal temperature variation. Not to mention accounting for micro-climates: if you live in the city your plants may bloom earlier than they do outside of town.

Either way, for me, it is all about the knowledge of how different flower forms perform, and perennial plants grow. Knowing what kind of plants will last long enough to endure our wild spring weather, will allow us to fret less about warm winters and late spring frosts.

In addition, preparing for Garden Day is nearly always a rush. So another important consideration is what plants will make a quick impact in the garden and appear established in a short period of time. It is all about durability and speed.

**BULBS**

The most frequent request I get for Garden Day planting is for bulbs, as they offer close to immediate satisfaction in the planting world--promising showy spring flowers after a fall or winter planting. That said, the timing of bulb flowers is one of the hardest to predict as their growth is subject to soil temperature.

I’ve found that, in general, double and more complicated flower types take longer to open so last longer than singles, and varieties with many flowers on a stem bloom for an extended period, as one flower opens at a time.

The double flower rule is especially true for TULIPS. Any double late tulip has a pretty good chance at blooming for garden day--at least here in Fredericksburg and NOVA. You are a bit warmer in the middle peninsula, but I would like to acknowledge the extended display traits of some tulip forms, for you to have in your spring planting arsenal.

There are always exceptions to the rule working with living things. We had an especially warm winter before the 2018 tour, and we had planted double Orange Princess tulips in catmint all the way across the front foundation of one of the open homes. The silvery-blue new foliage of the Nepeta and the bright oranges of the tulip flowers were lovely for nearly two weeks, until the

**Sally Harman 2/10/2021 Planting for Garden Day 1**

petals finally faded the morning before the rainy Tuesday tour. C’est la vie.

In addition to the Orange Princess variety, Danceline is a recent favorite tulip of mine--buttery yellow cream with flecks of cranberry at each petal tip. I’ve named a few other cultivars in the handout that I’ve shared with your club, but most bulb growers list by category, so you can choose the variety that best suits your garden or the house for which you are arranging.

Parrot tulips are also a good bet. They have a long drum-roll of interest before they hit their peak, due to the layered complexity of the petals. Double and parrot tulip flowers just take longer to develop compared with single flowers. My black and Estella Rijnveld parrot tulips have made their way into many Garden Day arrangements.

It is also important to note that planting tulips extra deep--10-12” will help insulate them from early-warming soils and excess moisture during their summer dormant season. This will extend their blooming years and help protect against an unwelcomely early display after a warm winter. The extra depth also helps keep them off the radar of voles. Planting bulbs a foot in the ground is

a hard pill to swallow when compared with the easy 5 or 6” hole made with a trowel. But, tulips can be worth it, so plant them as deeply as you and your garden can tolerate, and they will be more predictable and perennial.

The same rule regarding flower complexity goes for DAFFODILS. Mid-late spring varieties that have large double flowers or split coronas, and multi-flowering types last longest, so are safer bets when planning for late April blooms. Multi-flowering Geranium with orange cups and white petals, and Hawera--pale yellow that integrates well into the garden are two favorite varieties of mine. Sir Winston Churchill is multi-flowering and double to boot--a double-formed sport of Geranium.

Other bulbs that consistently bloom in late April, and obey the multi-flowering rule are Leucojum and Camassia. Leucojum aestivum, or summer snowflake, has art-nouveau-like nodding white bells with little green petal tips. Camassia, a tall native to the west coast, has typically blue, star shaped flowers that bloom on tall racemes. Both multiply readily and are very long-lived. Leucojum and Camassia are also both tolerant of wet feet--a rarity in the bulb world. So, if you have a wet spot in your yard, they are good options for that limiting soil condition.

I developed this program to give in early fall--bulb-planting time, but spring is really the time to plan for spring bulb planting. You can make notes on what garden spaces need adornment and at what height, and what colors would best compliment your spring palate. Notes on bulb desires are invaluable when you get to ordering time in September and everything spring-blooming appeals. Brent and Becky’s does allow their fall catalogue orders starting in March, if you want to get it done early while you can see what your garden needs.

**PERENNIALS**

Spring is a great time to plan for and plant perennials, as many of them (especially herbs and other species adapted to drier climates) do better with a summer to get established before enduring our cold, wet weather.

They are next on the satisfaction timeline, as perennials can be quick to flower and appear grown-

**Sally Harman 2/10/2021 Planting for Garden Day 2**

in after planting, especially compared to woody plants. There is some serious variability here as the word perennial is a catch-all for many types of plants with different life-spans, structures, and growth habits. In the spirit of Garden Day planning, here are a few of versatile perennials that are long blooming and fast-growing, or are at least fail-safe Garden Day performers.

AQUILEGIA, or columbine is fast-growing and reliable if want to add late April blooms to the garden. They obey the multi-flowering rule, sending up many stems per plant with multiple flowers blooming in sequence, extending their bloom-time up to two months. They are barely perennial, living only 2 or 3 years typically, but they prolifically self-seed, and are quick to mature. Growth rate and longevity are often connected--the faster a plant grows (and goes to seed), the shorter its life span may be. Regularly weeding your flower beds, and thus disturbing the soil, makes space for the seeds of these eager species and helps to keep the plants going in your beds. Scattering Aquilegia seeds in a part shade garden in late summer can produce flowering plants by Garden Day.

If you prefer the insurance of buying plants instead, it is best to get columbine in springtime. You are more likely to find younger plant stock--as they are so short-lived-- and there will be more varieties available during their flowering season. There are many species and hybrids to

choose from, most of which are long blooming and readily seed around. Our native columbine has the added benefit of attracting the first hummingbirds to return to our area after their winter migration. A sight as welcome as the flowers!

Perennial, hardy EUPHORBIAS or spurge are another relatively fast growing and showy perennial genus. Many develop their flower stems over the winter and bloom in early spring through the beginning of summer--perfect for ensuring April color. Some species are faster than others. Varieties like Euphorbia x martinii ‘Ascot Rainbow’ with variegated yellow and blue-green leaves and ‘Blackbird’ with tones of purple, blue, and black are stunning in a sunny or part-shade border. They quickly develop enough evergreen stems to appear like an established plant usually within a year from planting.

Another wonderful species, though a bit slower growing, is Euphorbia robbiae or “Mrs. Robb’s Hatbox”, a beautiful evergreen groundcover for shadier spaces that has clean chartreuse flowers reliably blooming for Garden Day.

Euphorbias have a special flower structure that is similar to a dogwood blossom in that what appear to be flower petals are actually sturdy modified leaves called bracts, which unlike petals last months in the landscape and weeks in a vase. The actual flowers are typically tiny and inconspicuous.

There are other spring perennials that are long-blooming, some of which are also quick to make an impact in the garden, which I have listed in the handout.

If you have time--a few years to plan--BAPTISIA is the most showy April-blooming perennial genus with long racemes of pea-flowers similar to lupine and clean glaucous (bluish) foliage. These are relatively slow growing, get pretty big 3’-5’ tall depending on the variety, and will live for generations if you don’t attempt to move them after a year or two--basically the opposite of Aquilegia in terms of growth and longevity. Baptisias have the added benefit of being East

**Sally Harman 2/10/2021 Planting for Garden Day 3**

coast native plants (all 15 species) and valuable food sources for newly emerging queen bumble bees. Mine have consistently bloomed for Garden Day and the tall flower stems are stunning in arrangements.

There are cultivars available in many different color ways: purple, blue, yellow, white, brown, pink, and bicolor. The Mt. Cuba Center in Delaware did a fantastic trial of Baptisia, with photos and descriptions that help to navigate the best varieties. I’ve included the website in the handout, or you can google Mt. Cuba Baptisia and it comes right up in your browser. Lemon Meringue--the fastest growing--and Purple Smoke are two of my favorites.

Mt Cuba has published many other trials of native plants like Coreopsis, Heuchera, Monarda, among others, that are worth checking out if you are interested in adding other showy native perennials to your garden.

If you are planting for a grand garden display and not necessarily for cut flowers, two shade perennials stand out: Tiarella cordifolia (foamflower) and Phlox divaricata and P. stolonifera (creeping/woodland Phlox). Both are woodland natives that slowly spread to make flowering carpets in mid-late spring. Tiarella has dainty white starry flower spikes, and the Phlox looks like a shorter, diminutive version of summer-blooming garden variety Phlox paniculata, with soft pink or blue-purple flower panicles.

**WOODY PLANTS**

The longest investment of time and space in Garden Day planning and planting is for trees and shrubs. There are many with mid-late spring blooms that, if we’re lucky, put on a grand display in late April. I’ve spent many weeks leading up to G-Day praying for the weather to stay cool so the dogwood blooms last, or to just go ahead and warm up already so the crabapples will open for the tour.

Since I am focusing on relatively fail-safe options, I am not going to discuss flowering trees and shrubs, though I have provided a list in the handout of some classic plants and some lesser-known and newer varieties that I think can be valuable for cutting and garden interest in late April. The flower structure rule is less handy with woodies as well, and woody plants often provide the best foliage for arranging and providing color on garden day, so blooms are not always the main event in this category.

Boxwood blight has thrown us all for a loop, since the GCV has prohibited the use of this Virginia garden mainstay in arrangements or to secure specimens. Rightly so, as it is essential to preserve our historic Virginia landscapes and prevent the spread of the disease so we can use these versatile plants in the future. Boxwood’s hardiness, fine tufted texture, and sturdy evergreen leaves make these plants invaluable as hedges, borders, and background greenery in the garden and in the vase. Since they are somewhat off-limits for now, I’d like to focus on a couple of replacements to consider until we get the blight under control.

ILEX CRENATA, Japanese holly, and ILEX VOMITORIA, Dwarf yaupon holly, are great landscape plants that have dense small evergreen leaves akin to boxwood. Both species have varieties that mature at different heights and widths as well, to satisfy different roles in the landscape.

**Sally Harman 2/10/2021 Planting for Garden Day 4**

Japanese holly leaves are a true emerald green, and well-suited to formal designs. ‘Hoogendorn’ is my favorite variety, with longer leaves than the species and a pretty, mounding habit.

Yaupon holly, a southeast native, is more of a staple garden plant in the middle peninsula than it is here in Fredericksburg, so you may be familiar with its pretty reddish new growth and silvery stems. These traits are especially nice when pulling warm colors out in the landscape--I like them complimenting deep red or pale yellow flowers. They are also fun to incorporate in a silver themed garden, to highlight the pale grey branches.

Another evergreen to consider, DISTYLIUM hybrids are a new phenomenon over the past ten to fifteen years in the landscape world. They are related to Loropetalum and witchhazel, and growers have been breeding them as a possible replacement for boxwoods and cherry laurels, among other

staple evergreens that are plagued by disease. You may have noticed your Otto Luyken or Schip laurels succumbing to shot-hole fungus, a ubiquitous and unsightly scourge to these otherwise pretty plants.

Distylium is hardy, drought and wet-feet tolerant, and very disease resistant, and the simple leathery leaves are beautiful in the landscape and in arrangements. They are easy to maintain and there are varieties in many sizes suited to the home garden, from 8’ tall ‘Emerald Heights’ to the smaller 3’ ‘Coppertone’ and ‘Cinnamon Girl’. The latter two have blue-green leaves with rosy copper new growth, that is a lovely compliment to pale pink flowers or the blush white of blooms like those of fragrant Viburnums. I planted Coppertone Distylium as a backdrop to fairy roses in a recent formal garden design. They are lovely together, and the Distylium handles the baking summer sun in that open landscape without the burn that afflicts some boxwood varieties.

I hope this has given you some tips and rules of thumb to consider when planning Garden Day plantings, whether for new homes on the tour or for your own. Thank you, happy planting, and be well!

**Sally Harman 2/10/2021 Planting for Garden Day 5**