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GGW Plant Pick of The Month- Plants with Variegated Foliage

October 25th, 2009 by Adam Woodruff · [9 Comments](#)



Dramatic gold and green variegated foliage of Canna 'Striata' pops in this display bed with Zinnia elegans 'Zowie Yellow Flame' and Z. elegans 'Uproar Rose', Rudbeckia hirta 'Indian Summer', Persicaria polymorpha, Perovskia atriplicifolia, Cleome 'Spirit Frost' and Cleome 'Spirit Merlot' and Calamagrostis x acutiflora 'Karl Foerster' companions.

Traditionally, GGW Plant Pick of The Month highlights a specific genus or cultivar. I'm going to try something different for October and feature plants with variegated foliage. They function as important accents in my seasonal displays. Note, photos will include companion plant names as well.

The term "variegated" calls to mind childhood memories of our spider plant ([Chlorophytum comosum](#)) nestled in its macramé hanger in front of the bathroom window. A combination of green and white markings on the same leaf is indicative of variegation. But variegation in its broadest sense includes leaves with two or more colors, with or without green.



Croton (*Codiaeum variegatum* 'Petra') with purple heart (*Tradescantia pallida*). Croton is also striking with *Tradescantia zebrina*, *Helichrysum petiolare* or Jewels of Opar (*Talinum paniculatum* 'Limon').

[Nancy Ondra's](#) wonderful book, *Foliage: Astonishing Color & Texture Beyond Flowers* (photography by [Rob Cardillo](#)), devotes an entire chapter to

'marvelous multicolors'. She addresses the origins of variegation, patterns, siting, as well as how to use multicolored plants successfully in the garden.

What causes leaves to be multi-colored? Ondra explains that cells found in the leaf normally contain chloroplasts, which typically hold chlorophyll (green) pigments necessary to carry out photosynthesis. When chloroplasts are absent, leaf tissue will be white; if they are present but lacking chlorophyll, those tissues may instead be yellow, pink, red, purple, or other hues due to the presence of other pigments.

[Canna 'Striata'](#) (shown above), a Missouri Botanical Garden [Plant of Merit](#), [Canna 'Phasion'](#) (syn Canna 'Tropicana') and Croton 'Petra' are three of my favorite variegated plants. All perform best in full sun and moist, well drained soil. Although Cannas can often tolerate 'wet feet'.

Below are photos other variegated plants I worked with this season.



Shell ginger (*Alpinia zerumbet*) brightens this vignette. Grouped with *Pennisetum 'Fireworks'*, *Cleome 'Spirit Frost'*, *Celosia argentea 'Fresh Look Red'*, *Petunia 'Easy Wave Blue'*, palm (*Washingtonia robusta*), *Verbena bonariensis* and *Cyperus papyrus*. Note, shell gingers typically prefer relief from the afternoon sun. I have had success growing them in full sun by providing supplemental moisture.



Variegated tapioca (*Manihot esculenta 'Variegata'*) paired with *Scaevola aemula 'Outback Purple Fan'*. This under-used tropical has somewhat woody stems that I have found to be sensitive to high winds, plant in a sheltered location.

A more mature specimen with additional companion plants can be seen [here](#).



Sword-like leaves of mother-in-law's tongue

(*Sansevieria trifasciata* 'Black Gold Extreme') are paired with coleus (*Solenostemon scutellarioides* 'Curly Lemon Lime').



Bold arching leaves of false agave (*Furcraea foetida*), a succulent, contrast nicely with the fine foliage of Mexican feather grass (*Nassella/Stipa tenuissima*). The plants have similar cultural requirements (full sun, dry conditions) making them a perfect pair for this simple container display.

Note, the plants I have chosen to highlight in this post are considered annuals in my [USDA zone 5](#) gardens.

If this is your first time visiting GGW Plant Pick of The Month and you'd like to participate, here is how it works. Simply post your comments below and link to your own site where you've posted photos of variegated plants and comments about your experiences working with them. Notes regarding successful planting combinations are especially welcome!



Tags: [GGW Plant Pick of The Month](#)

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9 responses so far ↓

- [1 Helen at Toronto Gardens](#) // Oct 25, 2009 at 12:28 pm

One of the great pairings in my garden are two variegated plants, Daphne 'Carol Mackie' and Hosta 'Striptease', which complement each other nicely in contrasting leaf texture and "inside out" variegations. Here's where I posted on them back in June 2008:

<http://torontogardens.blogspot.com/2008/06/faves-carol-mackie-daphne.html>

Lovely! Thank you for sharing Helen.

AW

- [2 Nell Jean](#) // Oct 25, 2009 at 3:34 pm

I've posted variegated plants all summer, but brought some together in a single new post just for this feature:

<http://seedscatterer.blogspot.com/2009/10/variegation-plants-of-many-colors.html>

Many of the variegated plants that you showed are perennial in my garden, including cannas, purple heart, alpinia. I bring some purple heart, alpinia and begonias into the Winterhouse for color.

Nell Jean. Thanks for sharing! I love the combo of Persian Shield and Lycoris on posted on your blog. I think I may try yellow Lycoris with Persian Shield next year.

Adam

- [3 Carolyn Parker](#) // Oct 25, 2009 at 4:47 pm

Thanks GGW for the fun request!!

<http://www.rosenotes.com/2009/10/ggw-plant-pick-of-the-month-variegated-foliage.html>

Carolyn. Thanks for sharing your beautiful photos and combinations. I love the Iris pallida with Rosa rugosa. And, the 'Butterfly' maple is dramatic! My Miscanthus 'Gold Bar' did not overwinter in central Illinois. Have you had success? Thanks.

Adam

- [4 Autumn Belle](#) // Oct 26, 2009 at 2:41 am

There are so many colourful, beautiful variegated plants here which makes a garden comes alive. This post is a gardening lesson for me today.

Autumn. I'm glad you enjoyed the post. Check back for updates to the comments section where readers will link to their own sites with photos and comments. By the way, I love Malaysia. I visited two years ago at Christmas time.

AW

- [5 joco](#) // Oct 26, 2009 at 3:21 am

The gloriously multi-coloured variegations that you feature today can only be achieved in the form of houseplants where we are. Still, we can have something similar for part of the year at least with some of the shrubs available to us.

Autumn colouring of my favourite shrub Cotinus coggygria "Notcutt's variety" is so spectacular, that it makes up for the lack of more exotic warm climate plants we cannot grow.

I re-cycled a post from Autumn 2008 on

<http://leafdays.blogspot.com/2009/10/nature-needs-no-paintbrush.html> and wonder if this might fit in with your request.

Joco. Thanks for the great post! I enjoyed the General Botany lesson. I can see why Notcutt's variety is a favorite.

Adam

- [6 Carolyn Parker](#) // Oct 27, 2009 at 2:31 pm

Adam, My garden is in the California Sf Bay Area, so the miscanthus 'Gold Bar' overwinters like a champion.

- [7 Pacey](#) // Oct 27, 2009 at 3:17 pm

This is a beautiful garden...just delightful to see them so colorful.

Thanks Pacey!

AW

- [8 judy blooms](#) // Oct 28, 2009 at 10:08 am

Thanks for sharing these gorgeous pics! This summer I was finally able to find Tropicanna at our local garden center and planted in a a container with Lantana, sweet potato vine and a few other annuals and was thrilled by the non-stop performance all summer – even with all the rain here in the Northeast!

Hi Judy. Thanks for your comments. Sounds like a winning combination in your container.

AW

- [9 healingmagichands](#) // Oct 31, 2009 at 4:36 pm

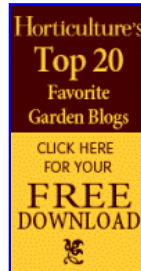
My favorite plant for variegated foliage has got to be the Hosta. As far as I know, there aren't many other plants that display the incredible variety available in that one Genus. That's what I featured in my blog post on variegation.

<http://healingmagichands.wordpress.com/2009/10/31/variegated-blog-theme-and-variations/>

Thanks for sharing. Your hosta plantings and combos are great!

Adam

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