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GARDENING

ALABAMA GARDENER

ALABAMA'S OWN GUIDE TO GREAT GARDENING & LANDSCAPING

**YEAR-
ROUND
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PLANNER**

**CREATIVE
CONIFER
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BLACK FLOWERS & FOLIAGE

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Drama

IN THE LANDSCAPE

Captivate the eyes and the imagination with black flowers and foliage

Lucky is the landscape that
Oxalis triangularis darkens.

Black plants aren't new, but they are definitely in vogue. For the gardener seeking drama in the landscape year round, black plants set a sultry, exotic tone. And what is Halloween without the classic color combination of black and orange? Knowing a few tricks with these mysterious plants will turn your garden into a visual treat. Story by Laura L. Bruner, Ph.D.

To

o clarify, however, black flowers and foliage are a trick on the eyes, because the pigments that create colors in plants don't occur in black – by definition, black is the absence of color. Coloration is determined by the wavelengths of light reflected by the petals or foliage. Pigments inside the petals absorb certain wavelengths, while other wavelengths are reflected back towards our eyes, creating the color we see. So, close observations in bright sunlight shows that “black” plants are actually the darkest, most saturated shades of red, blue or purple. The plants appear black because they contain pigments that are absorbing most of the wavelengths. Black plants are intriguing for us, but not to pollinating insects so they rarely occur in nature. Selective breeding, however, has created a wide variety now available in the horticultural trade.

The desirable dark colors in plant foliage come from plant pigments called anthocyanins, which protect foliage from ultraviolet rays. Bright sunlight stimulates anthocyanins and results in deeper, more saturated colors in the plant's foliage. In the shade, a plant with dark foliage will eventually turn dark green as the quantity of anthocyanins fades and the chlorophyll pigment becomes dominant.

Black flowers, on the other hand, will fade quickly in sunlight and will show their deepest hues only in a mix of shade and sun. The petals also contain anthocyanins. However, because the pigments are water soluble and unstable, the flower can water spot or fade in excessive bright light.

Above: *Ipomoea batatas* 'Blackie' paired with its chartreuse counterpart is a tried and true combination.

The velvety foliage of *Solenostemon* 'Dark Star' looks especially dark next to chartreuse foliage. ▽



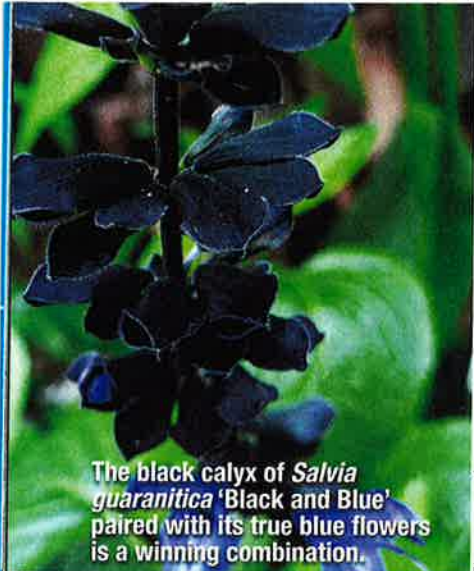
Photo courtesy of Laura Bruner.

So, for lasting dark colors in the bright sun, choose plants with black foliage. For dark impacts in a mix of sun and shade, choose plants with black flowers

For the Southeastern gardener who wants year-round black accents, there are a surprising number of options. *Helleborus x hybridus* 'Black Diamond' provides intrigue with its inky dark flowers and foliage in late winter and early spring. While pastel and bright colors are the usual spring attire, *Iris* 'Superstition' and *Tulipa x hybrida* 'Queen of the Night' give plantings dark sophistication planted in mass or paired with vibrant hues. With its dark bronze and maroon foliage, *Rhododendron* 'Ebony Pearl' is definitely not your grandmother's spring azalea, and contrary to the general rule for dark foliage, performs best in filtered shade.

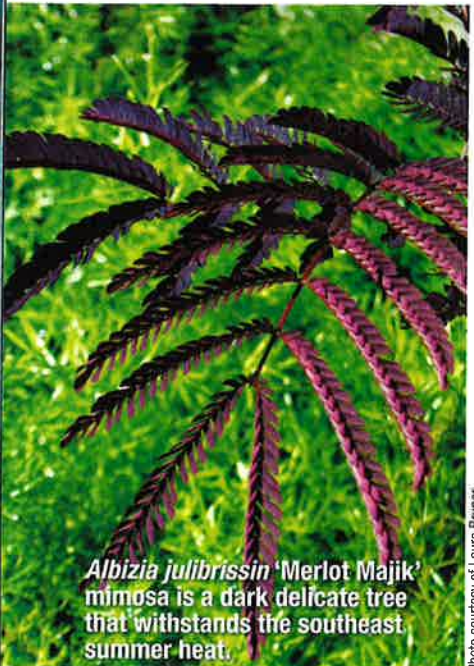


Photo courtesy of Laura Bruner.



The black calyx of *Salvia guaranitica* 'Black and Blue' paired with its true blue flowers is a winning combination.

Photo courtesy of Wendymerte on Flickr



Albizia julibrissin 'Merlot Majik' mimosa is a dark delicate tree that withstands the southeast summer heat.

Photo courtesy of Laura Bruner



Ipomoea batatas 'Blackie' combined with the harvest gold of marigolds and orange pumpkins is perfect for the spooky season.

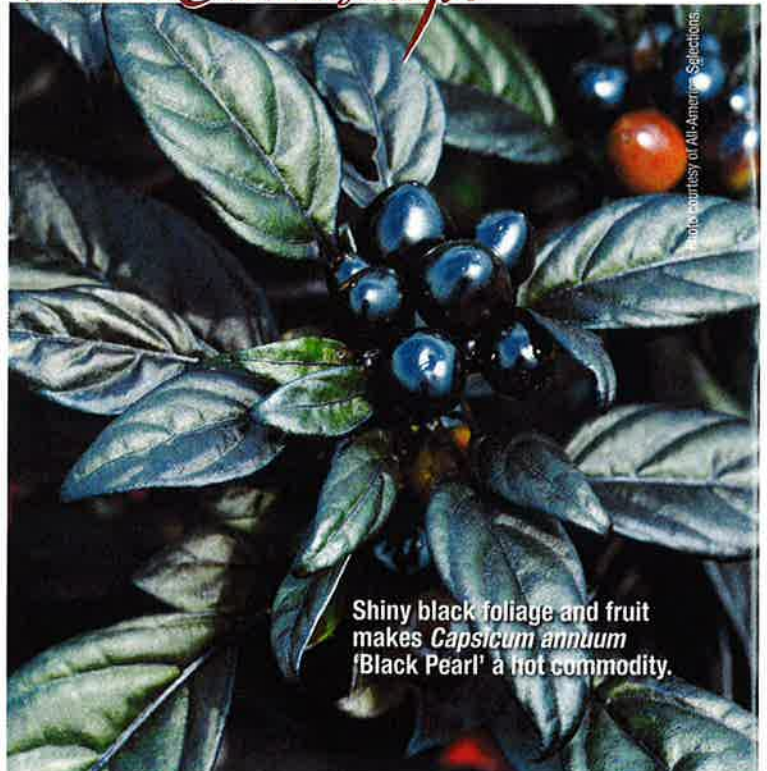
Photo courtesy of Laura Bruner

Drama in the Landscape



The smoky look of *Alternanthera dentata* 'Rubiginosa' and bold harvest colors makes a spirited planting combination.

Photo courtesy of Laura Bruner



Shiny black foliage and fruit makes *Capsicum annuum* 'Black Pearl' a hot commodity.

Photo courtesy of All-America Selections

One of the newest and truest black flowers on the market is *Petunia x hybrida* 'Black Velvet'. Introduced by the Ball FloraPlant company, it has been catching attention at recent garden trials and it is touted as a sun-loving annual. Imagine the possible combinations for containers with its black visual zing late spring through fall. *Alcea rosea* 'Nigra', a black hollyhock, provides a new, dark twist to an old-time summer favorite with its tall flower stalks paired with a white picket fence. *Salvia guaranitica* 'Black and Blue' (Brazilian sage) is a perennial that gets its name from blue flowers and an almost black calyx.

Dark foliage can be a reliable and consistent black element in the landscape or containers. *Colocasia* 'Black Magic' (black elephant ears) is hard to ignore with its large tropical leaves and deep, dark foliage. The velvety foliage of *Solenostemon* 'Dark Star' seems to absorb all light and looks extremely dark next to its chartreuse-colored coleus kin. *Begonia rex* 'Harmony's Black Velvet' steals the show in containers with its intricate leaves and smoky color. A drought tolerant option is *Sedum x hybrid* 'Black Jack', which has the deepest purple foliage of any sedum cultivar and maintains the tough and easy to grow reputation of the genus.

Shrubs with the dark look include *Physocarpus* 'Diablo' (diablo common ninebark) and *Sambucus* 'Black Lace' (black lace elderberry). Taking dark burgundy foliage to new heights, Nurseries Caroliniana, Inc. has developed *Albizia julibrissin* 'Merlot Majik', a mimosa with dark foliage that stands up to summer heat.

Even ground covers and trailing plants have their dark sides. *Ajuga reptans* 'Black Scallop' (black scallop bugleweed), *Ophiopogon planiscapus* 'Nigrescens', black mondo grass, and *Oxalis triangularis*, purple shamrock, darken the lower level of the landscape while the reliable standards of *Ipomoea batatas* 'Blackie' and 'Black Heart' (ornamental sweet potato vine) spill out of containers throughout the growing season.

To conjure the Halloween spirit, combine any of the dark foliaged plants mentioned above with the crisp orange and golds of late season marigolds, pumpkins and gourds. *Capsicum annuum* 'Black Pearl', black pearl ornamental pepper, with its pure black leaves and initially black fruit that matures to red, is a natural for the season. *Alternanthera dentata* 'Rubiginosa', ruby calico plant, is a tropical annual that

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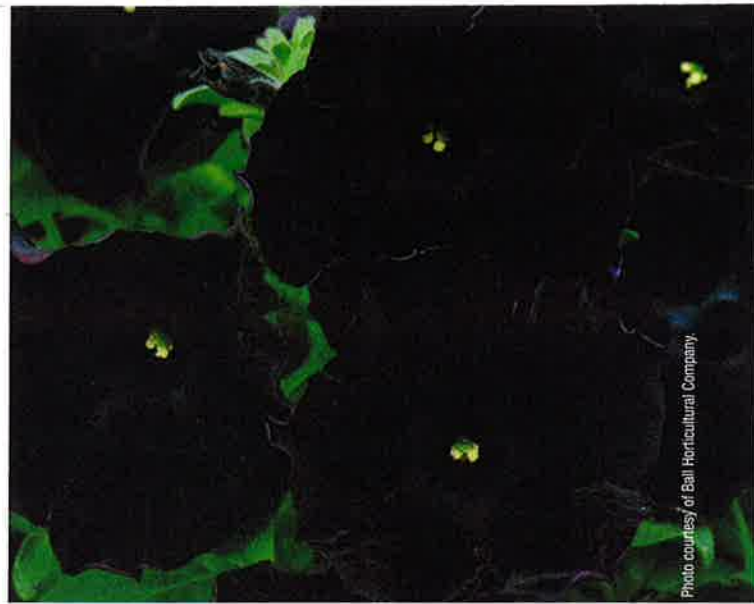


Photo courtesy of Ball Horticultural Company



Photo courtesy of Laura Bruner

△ *Alcea rosea* 'Nigra' provides a new, dark twist to an old time summer favorite.

Top: The new 'Black Velvet' petunia from Ball FloraPlant.

gives spirited plantings a smoky look when contrasted against bold harvest colors. Aptly named 'Halloween II' pansy (*Viola x wittrockiana* 'Halloween II') has a dark flower that epitomizes the spooky season.

Black flowers and dark foliage captivate the eyes and the imagination with their contributions to the landscape, mysterious in their own right and enhance the impact of surrounding colors as well. They add sophistication and surprise in any season. As it is said, black goes with everything. 🌿

Dr. Bruner designs residential landscapes in the Dallas area in addition to writing and speaking to horticulture groups. She formerly taught landscape design in Auburn University's Department of Horticulture. Her landscape design business, Two Trees Designs, designed residential landscape in East Alabama and West Georgia before relocating to the Dallas area. You can contact her with comments and questions about this article at laurabruner@tx.rr.com.

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