

Consider color in context for spring gardens

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March 5, 2011 ET

Brighten up: Color is in the forecast.

It's hard to resist the kaleidoscope of colors in a garden shop in spring, but a little discipline actually makes a garden's palette more effective. The careful use of color helps focus your eye in a garden and brightens areas that deserve attention.

"Color is important in a lot of different ways," says Laura Stack, a garden designer and owner of Creative Consulting for Outdoor Spaces. To get it right, the colors should relate well to one another.

"You want colors to have a common denominator," she says.

Everyone wants color everywhere, Stack says, but the colors in a pretty garden are placed carefully in the overall context. Think of the landscape around your home as a whole scene, she says. Green is always the foundation against which splashes of red, yellow, pink or blue stand out brilliantly. Finding the right balance makes all the difference.

"If you have too much color going on, it looks like chaos," Stack says. "If you have just a little bit of color, it makes no impact."

To get the most out of colorful flowers, Stack plants in drifts, grouping plants together so you can't miss the show. She repeats colors throughout a garden, limiting the palette but adding a playful touch of a contrasting hue here and there. Where just a few flowers are called for, she might plant them in a pot for an effect as pretty as a bouquet.

Interior designers use similar techniques, says John Rufenacht, an enthusiastic gardener and owner of Rufenacht Interior Design. Combining just two or three great colors looks calm, controlled and sophisticated, he says. Rufenacht uses strong colors on the walls in his condominium in Kansas City and warm tones with striking, graphic accents for Evening Place, his country garden retreat in Clinton.

Around a fountain in the garden's courtyard, Rufenacht clustered pots of deep red and coral standard-trained roses. When they are in bloom, the roses are the center of attention. Red pillows on lounge chairs and benches echo the warm hues and sustain the summery theme even when the roses take a break.

Rufenacht prefers strong colors, such as red walls, and he uses orange, blue and gold with aplomb. In a sunny spot in his garden, he grows bright magenta perennial salvia. Last summer he made room in a flower bed for a sweep of yellow cactus-flowered dahlias infused with pink, like a fiery sunset.

Spring calls for bright colors, Rufenacht says. White gardens, emphasizing snow-white or luminous moonlight blooms, "are a fabulous concept, I'll agree, but from a little distance it isn't exciting," he says.

The white daffodils he planted one year came up and bloomed prolifically, but he was disappointed by the effect.

"In spring, I need that injection of color," he says. "Nothing beats it. It just makes you go out and sing if you can see all the great yellows and oranges."

Plant hybridizers know gardeners want color, and not just in the spring. Dan Heims, owner of Terra Nova Nurseries in Oregon, has changed the world of coneflowers with his breakthrough introductions, including the unexpected bright-red coneflower Hot Lava.

The palette of pretty native tickseed (*coreopsis*) now includes tropical and jewel tones. Heucheras, with their ruffled purple leaves, are now showstoppers in glowing chartreuse.

Proven Winners brought a warm apricot Creme Brulee and a glowing Peach Melba heuchera to market. Plants such as these are punching up the palette in otherwise subdued shade gardens.

Pansies, petunias, impatiens, lantanas and other summer annuals are the throw pillows of the gardening world, and trying out new annuals every year gives you a chance to experiment with color without breaking the budget. A couple of six-packs or

a flat of these bedding plants can have a great effect.

Ball Horticultural, which distributes Wave petunias and the Simply Beautiful brand, advertises showy coleus and darkly dramatic ornamental millet among other leafy plants that offer boom without bloom.

Tim Butt, owner of Black Bamboo, a shop in the Crossroads specializing in Asian and modern furnishings, relies every year on annuals to wake up his garden in Prairie Village. The small garden is a study in textures, with a few evergreens, feathery Japanese maples and handsome bamboo.

“It’s very quiet and limited in its color palette,” Butt says, “but every year I have a little section where I want more color.”

Butt works with Kristopher Dabner, owner of the Greensman in Kansas City, to come up with new colors every year. Even though Butt picks his own colors in interior projects, he likes the freedom of turning to designers for help outdoors.

“I always go to garden shops to see what’s out there and what I like, but they come up with some cool stuff that I never would have thought of,” he says. Changing color every year “is a great way to have the garden always feel fresh and new to me.”

Butt recently returned from a trip to Morocco, where colors and patterns are brilliant and unabashed. The electric blue and citrus colors in the Majorelle garden, in a palm grove in Marrakech, were breathtaking, he says, “but if everything is really colorful in the garden, it’s hard to appreciate.”

He likes using color as a surprise, with glazed flowerpots or garden-furniture pillows that pick up on flower colors. “I do that from an interior standpoint, too,” he says. “We start with a base palette and add pops of color.”

It doesn’t really matter what colors you choose. Some people like orange and others can’t abide it, Stack says. Some clients like soothing, harmonious colors and others prefer bold contrasts. Last year, color experts proclaimed turquoise as the color of the year, and this year we’re deep into pink.

“The trends make you think about a color you might not have thought about otherwise,” Rufenacht, the interior designer, says. But what’s in will be out again, he says, so go ahead and plant your favorite colors against the backdrop of a gorgeous green garden. “That’s what the miracle of green is all about,” Rufenacht says. “Green becomes the glue. It’s the color that makes all of it work together.”

SAY IT WITH FLOWERSTo get the most out of flower color, you’re going to need plenty of flowers, especially if you have a fairly large garden. Buy more than you think you need, says Laura Stack, a landscape designer and owner of Creative Design for Outdoor Spaces.

“When I go shopping with a client, they pick up one of each plant,” for their shopping cart, she says. “I put 10 of each in there.” A few individual plants may look great together in a cart, but in a landscape, you need more for impact, she says.

Choose a few spots to brighten up with lots of color, Stack suggests. She helped a client with a large yard plant bright flowers at the end of the driveway, concentrating the experience of color in one spot instead of spreading it along the drive, where it would have become lost. Colorful flowers also are appropriate around an entry, she says, and in your view from the kitchen window. Finding the best spots to highlight and then repeat color themes throughout the garden creates a sense of continuity.

“Color offers excitement, enticement and focus,” Stack says. “For me, it’s trying to find the proper balance, so it’s all in scale, with highlights and accents.”

COLOR IN A CANGardens need time to develop and mature. The daylilies you plant this year will be pretty, but it takes years for a single fan of daylilies to grow into a clump that will be big enough to draw you across the garden to admire. While you wait, try paint.

“I tell interior clients, the best thing you have going for you is a can of paint, and it’s the cheapest thing you can do,” says John Rufenacht, owner of Rufenacht Interior Design. “It’s a fail-safe concept.”

For instant impact, pick up glazed flowerpots or colorful cushions for the outdoor furniture. A coat of paint will transform a bench, a gate, a trellis or a garage wall. You can match the color of the roses, choose a flattering complementary color, or try something flashy and full of contrast.

“You might be amazed,” Rufenacht says. “It can really be a jumping-off point to make you rethink color.”

Don’t be afraid of making mistakes, he says. You’ll learn by experimenting, and the results, even if they’re not what you intended, can be rewarding.

“It’s the unexpected ways of combining things that can make it all more delightful and interesting,” he says.

RESOURCES•Laura Stack, Creative Consulting for Outdoor Spaces: 913-432-1577

•The Greensman: 816-523-1516, www.thegreensman.com

•Black Bamboo: 1815 Wyandotte St., 816-283-3000, www.black-bamboo.com

•Rufenacht Interior Design: 816-561-7795, www.rufenachtinteriors.com



A former porch swing looks up to date in the garden with a fresh two-tone palette.