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The dark side of horticulture

Take a walk on the wild side of botany and experiment with black flowers and dark foliage

By Steve Whysall, Vancouver Sun May 27, 2011

Ever felt the urge to go over to the dark side of horticulture -where all the flowers are black as midnight or the foliage has a punky Goth look?

One of the hit plants of last summer, and one that is expected to be an even bigger seller this year, is the world's first black petunia, 'Black Velvet,' developed by Ball Horticultural in Chicago.

It was what the nursery industry called the No. 1 "sleeper" plant last year: Not expected to be as popular as it has turned out to be.

Another variety called 'Phantom' has a yellow cross over black petals. 'Pinstripe' is similar, but with a light purple cross.

"People love the funky look of these novelty varieties, " says Scott Pearce, sales manager at GardenWorks in Burnaby.

"The moment they see them they definitely want them. We have used 'Black Velvet' in some planters for special clients."

Black is one of the brightest trends in gardening. Black flowers or deep purple, near-black foliage can add a dramatic contrast to a lacklustre landscape.

And dark looks achieved with a light touch are what more and more styleconscious gardeners are craving.

British garden guru Dan Pearson says there is "undeniable chic" about the colour black.

"It absorbs light and smoothes out the wrinkles. Darkness can add depth to a planting and is intriguing in moderation. If it is used well, it will always turn heads." Pearson says he was once bowled over in Paris by the sight of dark pines grouped together in a sun-filled courtyard of pale stone.

"The trees were clustered with spent fir cones that looked charred and brittle and a sweep of black grass had been planted at their base.

"Among it all were the darkest tulips I have ever seen. The contrasting brightness of the courtyard prevented the association from being either sombre or overwhelming."

True black, of course, is virtually nonexistent in the plant world. Most of the flowers and leaves that we see as black or near-black are actually deep shades of purple with hints of red or brown, deep blue or dark green. But this is no big issue.

The real challenge for Gothic gardeners is first to get to know the best plants in the black spectrum and then discover how to grow them successfully in eye-catching associations.

The easiest place to start is with tulips. 'Queen of the Night,' 'Black Diamond,' 'Black Knight' and 'Black Parrot' tulips are simple to introduce in fall to guarantee a striking showing in spring.

Pushing through a lush underplanting of purple-leaf coral bells or sage, or set against a silvery backdrop of artemisia or cardoon (*Cynara cardunculus*) or blue grasses, the satin black of the tulip petals can look exquisite.

Black mondo grass (*Ophiopogon planiscapus* 'Nigrescens') always looks dynamic against the white bark of birch trees.

The 'Black Magic' pansy, the closest colour to jet-black in the viola family, is a must-have, but there are plenty of other perennials with sultry, dark looks.

Heuchera 'Obsidian' has beautiful dark leaves as does Ajuga 'Black Scallop' while Coleus 'Black Dragon' has a great name but the foliage is actually a light purple.

Cimicifuga 'Brunette' is a popular perennial with black-burgundy leaves and fragrant white flowers in late-summer. 'Hillside Black Beauty' is similar with even darker foliage.

The black-leaf foliage of *Anthriscus sylvestris* 'Ravenswing' can look even more impressive when it puts out its white flowers.

Penstemon 'Husker's Red' is another favourite with purplish-dark foliage and pale pink flowers held on stiff black stems.

In the iris family, there's the classic *I. chrysographes*, regarded as one of the most sophisticated irises because of its dark flower, splendid vertical form and finely tapered lime-green foliage.

Among the bearded irises there's no shortage of blacks: 'Licorice Stick,' 'Hello Darkness,' 'Paint it Black,' 'Night Owl' and 'Superstition.'

In the hardy geranium family, there's the mourning widow cranesbill, *G. phaeum*, which gets its name from its dark maroon flowers, but a better choice for noir-obsessed gardeners is 'Samobor,' which has leaves with dark central zones and flowers that are deep plum-purple.

Other geraniums worth considering are 'Midnight Reiter,' valued for its deeply cut, purple foliage and violet-blue flowers and its cousin, 'Victor Reiter.' Black hollyhocks (*Alcea rosea* 'Nigra') with their deep chocolatemaroon blooms can have a commanding presence at the back of the flower border while in hanging baskets the jet-black potato vine, *Ipomoea* 'Blackie' is unbeatable.

For the water garden, there's 'Black Magic' taro (*Colocasia esculenta*) and for a slightly tropical accent in the perennial border, the castor bean plant (*Ricinus communis*) has large, dark star-shaped leaves.

Perfect black-foliage shrubs that act as beautiful backdrops for bright flowers include two outstanding cultivars of sambucus, 'Black Beauty' and 'Black Lace.'

For fall and winter interest, black chokeberry *Aronia melanocarpa* 'Autumn Magic' is always a showstopper, with its generous clusters of shiny black berries that can look spectacular glistening in the autumn sunshine.

In the final analysis, black can only triumph in the garden if the lightness of brighter colours cooperate as willing partners for the sake of introducing drama and contrast.

swhysall@vancouver.sun.com

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