HOME

Impatiens' lovely bedfellows

THERE ARE PEOPLE OUT THERE — I have observed them while ostensibly walking the dog — who have draped their yards, their houses, their lives with evergreens. Some of these plants also bloom, such as the azaleas, but the show is fleeting. The end of azalea season presents a double whammy: grief followed by longing for more floral color. Succor takes the form of impatiens.

When it comes to impatiens, the permutations are dizzying: red, white, salmon or that middle ground, pink. Soon, the gardener has forgotten all about azaleas. By June the little transplants have filled out (thanks, Miracle-Gro); by August the effect is florid but lumpy. By September the impatiens mounds are stretching, and by October they reveal their now thick, turgid stems. The gardener curses the approaching frost and longs for a greenhouse.

ADRIAN HIGGINS

I don't dislike impatiens. They offer constant bloom and color in gloomy corners of the yard. But I avoid planting them by the hundreds. If I wanted my garden to look like a chain hotel parking lot, I'd settle for a sign that says "Lock Your Car."

There are other shade annuals out there, and it's okay to mix them up. It's even all right to mix them with perennials or tropicals. You don't have to worry about frost until around Halloween. Make the most of it.

People who like to make plant compositions in containers refer to the three distinct roles of their combinations: thrillers, fillers and spillers. The first are upright specimens, the last the plants that trail over the rim of a pot, and the fillers everything else. The same design principle can apply to garden beds. And impatiens, for all my playful bashing, function well as fillers.

As you prepare your summer shade garden, think about plants whose primary ornament is their foliage. Here are a few of that work well in the Washington garden.

VALERY RIZZO/GETTY IMAGES

Is your shade garden a budding shrine to impatiens? Maybe it's time to tone it down.

BEGONIAS
Forget the bedding wax begonia. New varieties are grown as large foliage plants and work well as thrillers in small beds or containers, or as fillers in the shade garden. Gryphon, available since last year, has maple-like leaves, variegated green-black and silver, and with marked red veins. It would work well paired with "anything with silver tones: oranges, purples," said Bill Calkins of Ball Horticultural Co., its breeder. "It makes a neat thriller in the middle of a combination."

Dragon Wing is a begonia with dark, glossy green leaves and scarlet flowers and is widely admired for its ease of cultivation and vigor. Among the cane begonias, it's bulletproof. Angel Wing is an older type, though still a bold begonia. The late discerning plantsman Wayne Winterrowd favored the classic pink-flowering cane begonias President Carnot and Irene Nuss.

PAN AMERICAN SEED

The recently available Gryphon begonia will grow to 14 inches and works effectively with annuals of other silvery hues. Dragon Wing, glossy green with red flowers, is another easy-to-grow begonia for shade.

COLEUS
The world of coleus has exploded in the past 10 years with leaf colors and patterns to fit any combination or color scheme, hot or cool. If you can't find a coleus that works for you, you're just not trying. Some have golden or amber foliage, others lime green, yet others deep russet with acid-green margins. Just think about color combinations when choosing, and count on plants growing to as tall as three feet by September. Pinching stems will promote a compact, bushy habit. In a shade garden, avoid varieties for full sun.

CALADIUMS
Caladiums, like coleus, are an old-fashioned tropical enjoying a revival. This popularity has spawned new introductions. Caladiums are valued for their variegation, striking vein patterns and the way the markings change as each leaf develops and grows. As with other

BIGSTOCK

Coleus is a versatile and varied foliage plant with colors and patterns for every plant combination, whether warm or cool hues. In the shade garden, avoid new varieties developed for beds and containers in full sun.