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## Halloween plants from the dark side

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Black is the color du jour on Halloween. But have you considered dusting the garden with a bit of black magic as a holiday treat?

The voodoo lily, dracula orchid and devil's tongue are three shadowy subjects lurking in Paul Bonine's *Black Plants: 75 Striking Choices for the Garden* (Timber Press, \$14.95). Perhaps most intriguing, the [bat flower \(Tacca chantrieri\)](#), a whiskery exotic suspended on a long, black chordlike stem. Native to the jungles of Thailand, bat flower is a rare find in garden centers, but the tropical is available from [www.logees.com](http://www.logees.com).

Black needn't be reserved only for a single spooky night. There's a year-round supply of dusky beauties profiled in Bonine's book.

True black is elusive in the plant world. We often use "black" as an umbrella term in referring to the darkest flowers and foliage. For example, deeply saturated purple, burgundy, maroon and chocolate hues that are oh-so-near black.

Rather than cast gloom, these plants can add mystery, depth and sophistication to the garden. It's a matter of staging. Juxtapose dark against light, or mass dark plants in varied shapes and textures.

It's not difficult to use dark plants as container accents that can be closely observed. But without a little help from neighboring brighter colors, they can disappear in the garden, especially in shade. Silver, gold and chartreuse will elegantly light up dusky silhouettes. Hot red and orange or bright yellow cast black beauties in a sultry role. Pastels offer cool contrasts.

Breeders have long-pursued black blooms and foliage. The quest for a black tulip is ages old, and in 1850, a theme in Alexandre Dumas' *The Black Tulip*, a murderous love story set in 17th-century Holland. Although hybridizers have come extremely close, a true black tulip is not in the genes, many experts say. But '[Queen of Night](#)' is the next best thing. While some may gasp at the thought of a such a dark spring bloomer, others are bewitched by the satiny, aubergine-black tulip introduced in 1944. Refrigerate the bulbs with 'Pink Impression' tulips for six to eight weeks and plant in late December-early January.

We've been seduced by other dark blooms such as chocolate cosmos, a mahogany-tinged Mexican perennial, and black violas, a fall through spring annual in area gardens. When the elegantly sleek calla slipped into black-purple, voluptuousness reached new heights.

Dark foliage can linger for months in the garden. There's the spring-to-frost bold statement of the ebony shield-shaped leaves of '[Black Magic elephant ear](#)'. 'Inky Fingers' coleus casts small-scale drama in

warm-season pots with its deeply lobed, black-red foliage edged in chartreuse. 'Blackie' and 'Ace of Spades' ornamental sweet potato vines are now a mainstay in our gardens. Those lucky with [ajuga](#), can add 'Black Scallop' as a groundcover or accent. The mounds of black leaves almost glow.

And dark fruit is gaining ground. 'Black Pearl,' an All-America Selections winning ornamental pepper, is a jewel in pots and plots. This beauty produces clusters of small black peppers that turn red and then orange, perfectly displayed against the dark leaves.

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