

Fantastic Foliage: iLandscape™ Annuals that Wow!



by Nina A. Koziol

A feast for winter-weary eyes. That was Mark Dwyer's presentation at iLandscape where he inspired attendees with stunning plant combinations featuring more than 150,000 annuals. Dwyer is director of horticulture at Rotary Botanical Gardens in Janesville, Wisconsin. The 20-acre award-winning site features 24 different garden styles. Haven't visited yet? Put it on your to-do list this year and encourage your clients to visit, too. The gardens there are chock full of ideas for stunning plant combinations and imaginative, colorful hardscape elements.

Annuals need not be dressed in flowers to create a sumptuous display. Dwyer inspired attendees to use more annuals with colorful foliage that result in thrilling combinations for their clients. "Annuals are sometimes a tough topic for landscapers and homeowners because of the expense," Dwyer said. However, they can be used in small, cost-effective doses—in a foundation planting, in containers, and near entryways, patios or decks—for great visual impact. "A lot of people shy away from them because of the cost, maintenance and watering, but there are annuals with interesting foliage—whether it's color or texture that can be successfully used in your projects."

Dwyer says he's gone full circle with annuals over the past 20 years. "Back then, it was all about perennials—blooms and the sequence of flowers." Now, staff and volunteers plant 150,000 annuals—900 varieties—each year and the displays are always different. That's what keeps visitors coming back. There's always something new and unusual, whether it's the changing color themes of flowers and foliage, the eye-popping blue wooden obelisks or the bright yellow metal culverts set upright to serve as giant pedestals for containers. It's heaven for plant geeks and garden lovers.

"This was a great presentation on foliage plants," said Adam Prugh of Mariani. It was Prugh's fourth time attending iLandscape. "I came so I can keep up on innovation and trends and to keep up my education so I can excel at my job. This was a very informative program."

Sun Lovers

When it comes to foliage color, Dwyer likes maroon and reds. "They offer a lot of depth. And, our interest is in nearly black plants with textural interest." Dramatic, dark-leaved elephant ears like *Colocasia* 'Black Coral' offer color and texture that

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The garden "pyramids" get a new color each year to highlight the plant combinations near the entrance garden.



*Painted metal culverts serve as pedestals for pots of metallic blue Lyme grass (*Elymus arenarius*) in the blue-and-yellow display.*

You Should Have Seen This One —

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create a beautiful contrast next to an orange-flowered begonia. “The breeding in elephant ears is exciting,” Dwyer said. “Black Coral is the darkest leaf elephant ear based on our trials. If you’re buying them as bulbs, bigger is better.” He cautions that the plants like plenty of water.

Several varieties of dark-leaf elephant grass (*Pennisetum purpureum*) create striking vertical elements in the Garden’s beds, borders and containers. “They’re big— ‘Black Stockings’ can be 9 to 10 feet tall.” One stunning combination last year featured ‘Black Coral’ elephant ears surrounded by pots of fine-textured variegated pink fountain grass (*Pennisetum* ‘Fireworks’). “We like to mix up our textures,” Dwyer said. “We do lots with bananas and cannas, too.”

Whites and silvers should be in every bed and container, Dwyer told the audience. One of his favorite sun-loving annuals is a dusty miller, *Centaurea* ‘Colchester White.’ He calls the silver-leaved aluminum plant (*Dichondra*) an excellent edger in all sorts of containers. Woolly sage (*Salvia argentea*), cardoon, silver groundsel (*Senecio* ‘Mighty Velvet’) and plechtanthus are just a few of the silver-leaved annuals that lighten a border and glow in the late afternoon. “Massed together, whites and silvers can be very effective.”

Dozens of coleus cultivars are used throughout the Garden. In fact, Dwyer has never met a coleus he didn’t like—he selects 15,000 of them for sun and shade displays.

“I like the details on the leaf edges. The Main Street series of coleus is excellent.” One of his favorites, ‘Campfire,’ becomes much brighter in full sun than in shade. “Just remember that they are water hogs,” he said.

Shade Combos

Dwyer stopped using impatiens eight years ago because of blight. He found a great disease-resistant substitute—tropical or New Guinea impatiens, which handles full shade to full sun. “I love SunPatiens and there are 30 to 35 varieties.” (See them at <https://sunpatiens.com>)

In a shady setting with dappled light, Dwyer strives for foliage and flowers with yellows and whites. He touts *Begonia* ‘Canary Wings’ for its ability to handle shade and provide a chartreuse pop. “They were pretty sharp as a bedding plant and for containers,” he said.

He cautioned attendees that begonias need ample water and good drainage.

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A spectacular river of hot-colored annuals greeted visitors at the entrance garden.

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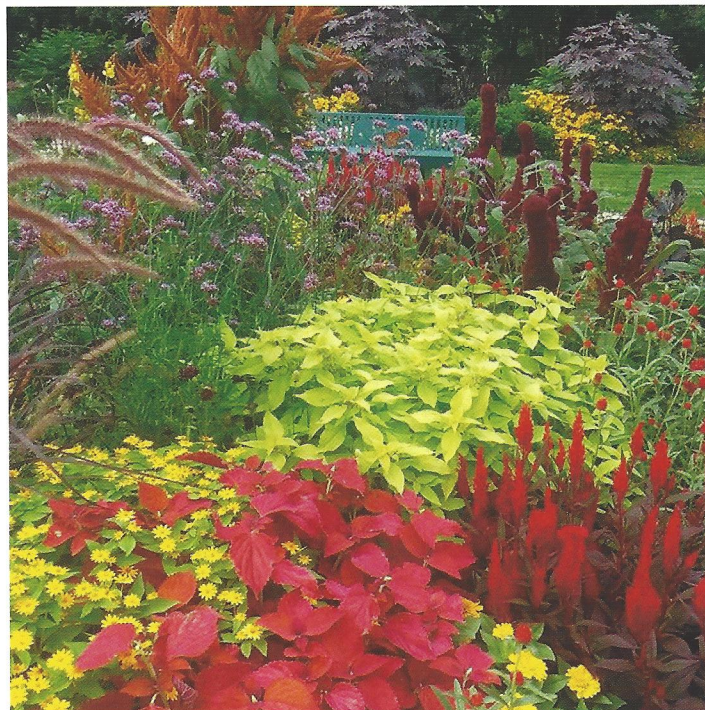
"I'm a massive fan of *Iresine*—they are dynamite in light shade with good soil and decent moisture." *Iresine*, also called bloodleaf for its colorful foliage, is as handy as coleus in shady sites. The shade gardens also use a wide assortment of hybrid begonias, caladium, and Persian shield (*Strobilanthes*) that offer striking leaf colors and textures.

Edibles

"When you think about designing a container, think about using edibles," Dwyer said. Ornamental and edible peppers with dark foliage, such as *Capsicum* 'Black Pearl' create some zing with their colorful fruits. "Black foliage adds a lot of depth and dimension in the garden," Dwyer said. Many of the Garden's edibles—kale, zucchini and beets have interesting foliage. Bull's blood beets produce thick, shiny burgundy leaves that are seldom pestered by insects. The colorful leaves and feathery flowers of amaranth (*Amaranthus tricolor*) are like exclamation points in flower beds. And, there are the herbs galore. "We like to use basil as a bedding plant. There are some absolutely beautiful basil for bedding out."

There's plenty more to see this summer. Check out the Garden's web site www.rotarybotanicalgardens.org and start planning your trip. You won't be disappointed.

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The show goes on well into autumn with amaranthus, coleus, celosia and more. In the background are the stunning annual 'New Zealand Purple' castor beans.



Parterre beds filled with amaranthus, nicotiana, celosia and gomphrena keep the display roaring into fall.

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Mark Dwyer's Tips

- Don't ever underestimate the impact of colorful and/or textural foliage.
- Foliage may be a supplement to flowers or may be the primary feature of interest. Perhaps foliage scent is an added benefit as well.
- Consider visual texture—bold, fine and everything in between—can add value.
- Group plants with similar needs: same soil, light and water requirements and they'll be happy neighbors.
- We have an expectation of plants that they'll thrive and survive. And, plants have an expectation of us. We do light fertilizing five times a year during the growing season.
- Consider inserting annuals in your designs, but they need maintenance so be prepared. It's not plunk-and-run mentality. We let the plants go as long as we can into October—don't get me wrong, it's a ton of time.
- We don't garden in just two dimensions. Offer verticality in residential gardens, in containers, and in commercial gardens. Trellis panels, obelisks, arbors and pedestals for planters bring the vertical element into a space.
- Paint it! The 10-foot-tall pyramids get painted every year to highlight different plantings. We use a lot of non-living color—we paint a lot of things. Don't be shy about using color on non-plant elements in the garden. It lends itself to the landscape.



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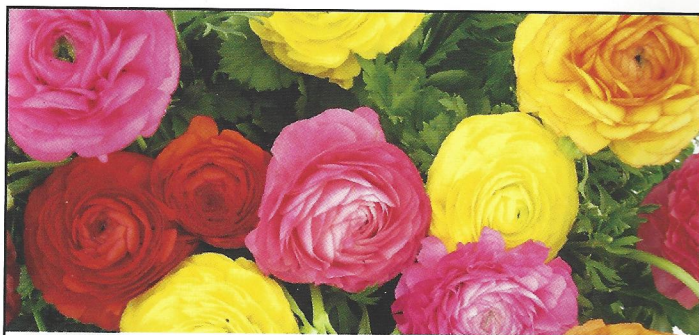
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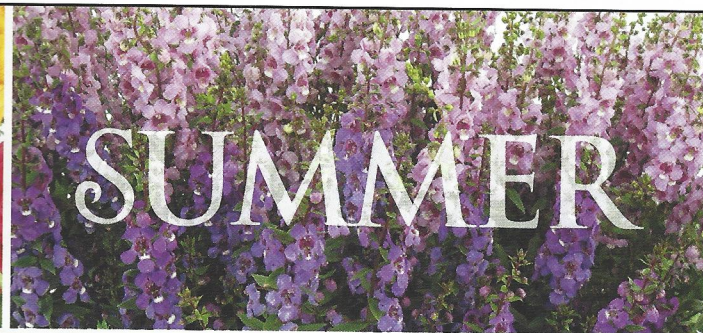
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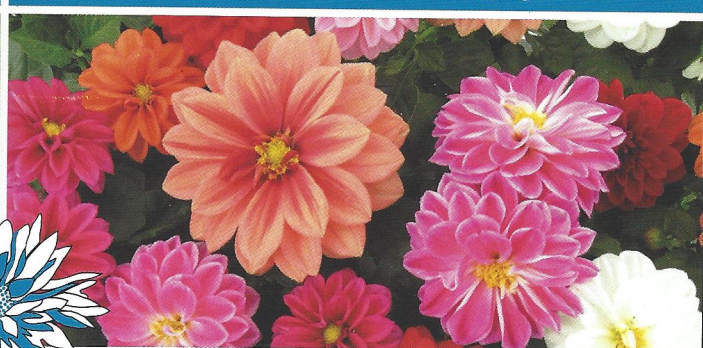


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Rotary Botanical Gardens By the Numbers

- Last year's display at the Rotary Botanical Garden included more than 900 varieties of 150,000 annuals.
- More than 4,000 varieties of plants grace the 24 display gardens.
- One-fifth of the annuals are vegetatively grown and the rest are grown from seed.
- More than 400 volunteers contribute 17,000 hours a year.
- About 25 to 30 thousand annuals are kept in reserve as replacements.

Take a Trip

The Rotary Botanical Garden is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year. Visitors to the Gardens enjoy guided garden tours, shopping, special events and a variety of educational classes and programs. <http://www.rotarybotanicalgardens.org> 



The new Wellness Garden, dedicated 2018, engages the senses, promotes healthy living and allows maximum accessibility