

Autumn's Rewards



by Sandy Phelps '02

Autumn is the time of the year when the earth bursts into an array of vibrant colors. Whole vacations are planned around driving to New England to see the oranges, reds and yellows painted on the living canvas of the hills and valleys. However, there's no need to travel hundreds of miles to enjoy this colorful display when, with careful planning and vision, it can be recreated in one's backyard.

The most notable of the autumn colors comes from the leaves of trees. A stunning medium-height tree good for a front lawn or large backyard is the **Black Gum**, *Nyssa sylvatica*. It turns a brilliant red in autumn, has dark blue berries and a deeply-fissured bark. For the smaller garden, plant **Japanese Maples**, *Acer palmatum*, for a pop of lovely red color and a soft-draping effect from the deeply-cut foliage.

Bark makes a statement in the autumn and winter months. The peeling barks of the **Paperbark Maple**, *Acer griseum*, and the Heritage River Birch, *Betula nigra*, stand out among the smooth grays of many trees. One of the most beautiful smaller ornamental trees for year-round interest is the **(1) Japanese Stewartia**, *Stewartia pseudocamellia*. In mid-summer camellia-like white blossoms adorn the branches. In autumn its leaves turn yellow to reddish purple for three to four weeks. In the winter, its peeling, reddish brown bark stands out against the newly-fallen snow.

Your yard may not have room for new trees, but there is always space to plant another shrub. **(2) The Purple Beautyberry**, *Callicarpa dichotoma*, a plain Jane during the summer months, bursts into a vibrant array of purple berries during the late autumn. This unusual color takes one's breath away. **Goldflame Spirea**, *Spirea bumalda* 'Goldflame,' lives up to its name when its summer yellow green leaves turn coppery in the autumn.

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There are many perennials that wait all season to burst into bloom in autumn. Asters abound with masses of tiny purple, blue, deep-red or white flowers and provide much-needed food for beneficial insects. For a damp area, pond or stream, a perennial that creates a showy display in October is the **Toad Lily**, *Tricyrtis latifolia*. Its gracefully arching branches teem with white and purple, orchid-like flowers just before frost. A pleasant surprise is the dainty flower of the **(3) Japanese Anemone**, *Anemone x. hybrida*. The rounded petals of the white or pink flowers rise above its scalloped foliage on thin stems. One of my personal

favorites is **Hot Lips Turtlehead**, *Chelone lyonii*. All summer it sits along the damp areas of my garden like a sturdy shrub, and then in late August produces a multitude of hot pink flowers along its stiff stems. **(4) Amsonia**, *Amsonia hubrichtii*, is stunning in June with its bright blue star-like flowers, but the real show begins in autumn as its thin stiff stems turn the color of wheat and gracefully move with the wind.

No autumn garden is complete without the wispieness of ornamental grasses which add a dimension of softness and the element of gentle sound in every season. Most popular are the 4-6 foot tall **Maiden Grasses**, *Miscanthus sinensis*, which are great for filling in a large area, and the 1-3 foot tall **Dwarf Fountain Grasses**, *Pennisetum alopecuroides*, that are smaller and have soft thin blades. The 2-3 foot tall upright blades of the **Feather Reed Grass**, *Calamagrotis acutiflora*, provide vertical interest without taking up a lot of width. The real stunners of the autumn are native grasses. **(5) Switch Grass**, *Panicum virgatum*, is silver green in color with autumn flowers that look like tiny star bursts. The blades of the **Northern Sea Oats**, *Chasmanthium latifolium*, turn a tawny color with showy wheat-like flowers that rattle in the wind. Adding just a few of these deer resistant, autumn beauties can extend the life of a garden far into October and November.