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## April - May - June 2021

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Was **EVER** a Spring so eagerly hoped for and anticipated as this one in 2021? Spring in Connecticut is always fleeting, always slow to come and quick to leave, always uneven and unsettled, always dangling promises and teasing gardeners, but sooner or later Spring does come and lead to Summer with all its promise. For the gardener, Spring means welcome work outdoors and after a long, gray winter it is indeed welcome. This year we have coped with the pandemic, snow, wind and brutal cold and we've made our lists, readied our tools, cleaned up the wheelbarrow and maybe even treated ourselves to a new pair of gardening gloves. We're ready, willing and able. As busy as the Spring gardener is, now is the time to take just a few moments to notice things: the first crocus and daffodils, the budding on the flowering trees, the peeping of the birds earlier and earlier in the morning, the changing of the light. We need to take a few moments to welcome Spring ... and to enjoy it. We've earned this one!

This past winter certainly caught our attention! Although the snow was manageable, wind storms did a fair amount of harm. You may be coping with damaged shrubbery or trees and replacement may be the only solution. The nursery is here to help you solve garden problems. Existing photographs are always a plus and will help you integrate new additions into your existing landscape. It is certainly disheartening to lose favorite trees, evergreens and shrubs to the force of nature, but it is also an opportunity to change the "look" of a landscape, expand a vista or try something new. Take a minute to sit and reflect on what you really want your garden to be from now on. This could be the perfect opportunity to head off in a new direction!

There are so many plants available! The gardening world has cycles .... plants become "hot" and are taken up, used and featured a great deal year after year by garden designers only to almost vanish several years later and become suddenly hard-to-find. Fortunately, there are almost always really outstanding substitutes waiting to find their forever garden home and many of them have been around a long time ... for a very good reason. Acer Gardens will be featuring and talking about many of these **Under-Used Plants** throughout the year. Browsing the Nursery benches will yield many surprises as you discover cultivars new to you but not to the gardening world! Get to know some of these plants and let them show you and your garden what makes them so special.

### Web Site

We keep working on and improving our web site! It's designed to be as interactive as possible and to give you more information quickly ... and it looks terrific! We will be using the Web Site to post current announcements so plan on checking it frequently. Read about our services, stay up to date on coming events and future workshops, learn about our plants and products, shop our Online Store, access our quarterly Newsletter and all the current Information Sheets and join us on Instagram (a great way to see what other gardeners are growing.) In response to your suggestions, we will also be posting more "How To" videos! We're always interested in hearing what our customers would like to see on the web site and what would be most helpful to you. Just remember: we don't have full-time office coverage because we like to spend the season down in the Nursery with you so you may have to leave us a message!

## **Ordering Online for Nursery Pick-ups**

Acer Gardens is now taking Online orders for Curbside Pick-ups, available Monday-Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. You can order all your favorite gardening supplies including tools, pest control and lawn care products, garden supplies, seeds, gift cards and plants and pick them up at a pre-arranged time.

## **Future Workshops**

Covid-19 has kept us from scheduling our customary Workshops and we understand how much they have been missed! We miss them too! Hopefully, we will be able to schedule new Workshops in late spring, summer and fall as soon as restrictions are fully lifted and we are sure we can keep staff and customers safe. In the meantime, we are always interested in hearing your suggestions for possible future workshops and gatherings! Please Email us your ideas and we will give them careful consideration.

## **Summer Gardens to Visit**

The Garden Conservancy runs self-guided tours of hundreds of private gardens from coast to coast during the summer months. Most of the gardens are only open to the public once a year. 2021 Open Days in Connecticut will start June 5 and run through September 12 with advance pre-registration (web site) required this year. Open Days are rain or shine events. Visit [www.gardenconservancy.org](http://www.gardenconservancy.org) to search by garden, city or state. Open Days are also listed for near-by Rhode Island, New York, and Massachusetts. The Garden Conservancy also runs Webinars and in-depth teaching programs.

## **The Really-Must-Do-Now List**

Spring garden chores (see the information Sheet on the Acer Gardens website) can seem daunting but don't be overwhelmed by the list. Each garden is different and not all chores are necessary for a particular garden. It's been a wet and snowy winter ... don't rush things!

Clean up and rake off the garden beds; get rid of dead foliage. Remove dead or dying branches on trees and shrubs which were injured by disease, storms or animals.

Cut down grasses and any perennials you left standing in the fall.

Fertilize your garden beds and don't plant anything new until the soil is completely friable ... grab a handful of soil and squeeze it. If water runs out or the soil compacts into a clump, it's too soon to work it.

Cut back old growth from yellow and red-stemmed Dogwood bushes.

Clean-up Hellebore old foliage now to help prevent disease.

Don't trim down Buddleias, Caryopteris, and Roses to about 18" until they are showing real growth and temperatures have steadied ... a late ice storm can do serious damage!

Prune: Rhododendrons and Lilacs after they bloom.

Move shrubs and/or perennials only when the ground begins to warm.

## The Plant of the Month

**The Plant of the Month** will be available the first of each month, starting in April, at the nursery. These plants are carefully chosen to feature current bloom times and to serve as an accent in your garden. Try something new! For the present, you can also order the current Plant-of-the-Month on the Online Store for curbside pick-up.

## April: Primrose

These early spring bloomers prefer light shade and rich, well-drained soil full of humus. Available in a wide range of colors, Primroses multiply each year and may even re-bloom in the fall. Prune off dead leaves, spent blooms and water thoroughly during the summer months.

## May: Aquilegia (Columbine)

Zone 3-9                      Height: 18"                      Spread: 12-24"

These lovely woodland plants do best in a location with partial sun or dappled shade. Give them well-draining soil, not too wet, with lots of room to spread. Water when the soil is dry; monthly light fertilizing will encourage thick foliage. Once established, this perennial will readily multiply and self-sow. Regular deadheading will encourage repeat bloom. Columbines are available in a wide range of colors and are a great favorite with hummingbirds and bees. The plants will also do well in containers but will need more frequent watering.

June: Astilbe

**Zone 4-8**                           **Height: 6-36"**                           **Spread: 18-30"**

Feathery plumes in white, pink, lavender or red will give colorful bloom for much of the summer, depending on the variety. Easy to grow, and very hardy, Astilbes prefer a site which receives light to moderate shade with moist, well-draining soil. As the season advances, supplemental watering and a dense mulch may be necessary as they do not react well to drought conditions. Deer resistant, this plant attracts butterflies and will form well-rounded clumps. Divide overgrown clumps every 3-4 years.

## Spring Products

Available Spring products at the nursery will include pelletized lime, pre-emergent fertilizer, lawn and garden fertilizers, Milorganite, organic lawn and garden products, grass seed, straw and control/repellent products for deer, insects, rabbits, voles, weeds, bugs and disease. April is the ideal time to apply lime, if needed, to the lawn and fertilize. Use pre-emergent weed control on the lawn in May.

Specialized products include:

**Seed Starter Soil and Supplies:** Get your seeds off to the best start possible!

**Soil Moist:** Reduces watering by absorbing and slowly releasing water into the soil. Useful both in containers and garden beds.

**Acer's Super Grow 18-6-18:** The nursery's own water-soluble plant food with micro-nutrients.

**BT Thuricide:** A bacteria (*Bacillus Thuringiensis*) used to control gypsy moth caterpillars.

**Milky Spore:** A bacteria designed for the natural control of lawn grubs.

## **Seasonal Reminders**

Cut back Gaura, Lavender, Perovskia and Montauk Daisies when you start to see bud break.

Give your Rhododendrons and Azaleas a generous feeding of Holly Tone.

April and May are ideal times for pruning evergreens. Remove dead, diseased or undesirable wood but remember to pay attention to the basic shape of the evergreen as you prune.

## **Weed, weed and weed again!**

If cutting Tulips for the house, do not use more than a few inches of water in the vase and add 1 tsp. of bleach to the water; change the water regularly. Keep cut Lilacs out of direct sunlight to discourage wilting.

Deer quickly get used to a specific repellent so it's a good idea to rotate the products you use fairly often.

Check the nursery web site to access relevant Information Sheets on attracting hummingbirds and butterflies.

## **What's so Special about Pansies? Everything!**

Traditional pansies bloom from spring through early summer, with some repeat bloom in the fall. They are ideal used as edgings, can be popped in rock walls and along paths and make perfect container plants. Try planting Pansies with other cool-season and frost resistant plants. Consider combining them with Alyssum, English Daisies, Viola, Lobelia and Primroses. Lettuce and Parsley add a light touch to Pansy planters and are easily harvested. Many herbs combine well with pansies and will keep going long after the Pansies have finished. Even a small evergreen will serve as a good background to pansies and provide a strong line to the container. Cold-hardy annuals ... Osteospermum, Diascia, and Nemesia ... can provide a subtle color echo to pansies in the violet to purple range. Pansies like cool temperatures but you can help them last a bit longer as the weather warms up.

Fertilize them only at planting time, using a slow-release granular fertilizer. They like full or partial sun but actually need cooler temperatures to thrive. Try not to put them in strong afternoon heat. Be sure they get enough water ... pansies are much thirstier than people realize, especially when planted in containers! As the plants start to get leggy, cut them back a few inches. Make sure these containers get no more than 6 hours of sun a day. Putting them in the shade for the hottest part of the summer may actually help them regroup to bloom again in cooler fall weather.

## **Aftercare for Bulbs**

Photograph your bulbs as they begin to bloom and keep them as a permanent record. The photos will be helpful next fall as you plan where to plant new bulbs.

Don't forget to deadhead Daffodils and Tulips as they stop blooming. Cut the flowers off but let the stems and leaves turn brown before you cut them down. Bulb experts advise against braiding the leaves. You want all that nutrition from the leaves to go back into the bulbs. Bulbs still need sun and water to form next year's flowers. Many gardeners give them a light fertilizing with Bulb Tone as they are blooming.

Adding spreading plants to your bulb areas will cover up the fading bulbs and give your garden a second wind. Many Daffodils will happily naturalize and spread over years but, in this climate, most tulips have a limited life span of 3-4 years at most. If you plant your Tulips among perennials slow to break in the Spring, their growing foliage will help to disguise the dying tulip foliage.

## **Spring Pruning**

Remember that most Hydrangeas (not *hydrangea arborescens* ... ‘Annabelle’ and ‘Samantha’), flower on old wood. Remove any dead or broken branches in spring but do not prune. Fertilizing with a product containing 18-5-9 will encourage flowering. Spent blooms should be removed after flowering. Any light pruning should be done directly after bloom before the bushes set next year’s flowers.

Lilac bushes should be pruned each year, after blooming. Remove all spent blossoms. Trim and clear out larger stems from the center to increase air space. You can leave some small suckers/shoots at ground level to develop into larger stems. This will encourage a wider bloom area. Lightly shape the bush until you like the way it looks but don’t give it an un-natural “flat top”.

Mature Rhododendrons seldom need pruning but, if you must, prune right after they bloom as they set next year’s flowers very quickly. Look for the little green leaf buds on the stem and cut  $\frac{1}{2}$ ” above them. Let the natural shape of the plant dictate your pruning ... it’s not supposed to look “organized”.

Azaleas and Weigela bloom on wood at least one year old. After bloom, these bushes should be very lightly hand pruned in order to maintain the natural shape of the bush. Carefully remove selected old wood every 3 years, allowing the bush to rejuvenate itself.

## **National Arbor Day: April 30, 2021**

We’ve all missed celebrating special family events together this past year. This might be the perfect time to mark an anniversary, designate a special occasion or pay honor to a family member by planting a tree! Sited carefully (and well away from power lines), your new tree will be a living reminder of a special day or person and will increase in beauty as time goes by, benefitting this and future generations. Stop in and choose a tree ... we’re here to help and can advise on the most suitable trees for your chosen location and the best way to plant and care for them. Whether you choose a flowering tree or a shade tree, you will benefit the environment and bring beauty to the surrounding landscape at the same time.

## **The Earliest Spring Bloomers**

Winters are long in New England and this last year has been particularly difficult! All gardeners look forward to seeing the bright splash of bulbs in the Spring but sometimes we forget that there are other early Spring bloomers waiting to bring color to the landscape. Many are cold-tolerant; mix them with later-blooming flowers to prevent bare spots in garden beds. Some are “ephemerals”, blooming and vanishing in the space of a few months only to re-appear next year. Planted on the edge of a woodland, they add their own charm to the landscape. Think about using Snowdrops, Crocus, Crested Iris, Grape or Wood Hyacinths, Winter Aconite or Fritillaria. Extend the bloom time by adding Pulmonaria, Creeping Phlox, Iberis (Candytuft), Brunnera (Bugloss), and Mertensia (Virginia Bluebells.)

## **Editing a Mature Garden**

All gardens should be edited periodically to keep them looking fresh ... sometimes it's just a question of reducing over-crowded beds or moving plants to a new location, one that will better meet their needs and reduce the required maintenance on your part. Time and changing physical strength lead many gardeners to consider downsizing their gardens and making them easier to care for and move around in. Sometimes your tastes have changed and you want to add more native plants or create a garden that appeals to a changing family. Lowering upkeep and maintenance is often as simple as creating cleaner lines and using shrubs to produce a full background look. Slopes can be covered with ground covers or spreading small evergreens, reducing the need for mowing.

Aim for season-long interest, relying on foliage. Shades of green are restful to the eye and, repeated throughout the garden, produce "flow". Carefully-chosen shrubs can give bloom from March to October. Using small trees will give accents and help create focal points. Make sure your soil is in top-notch condition. Use long-blooming perennials to give interest and spice to the front of the shrub borders but try to avoid plants that are not disease or insect resistant or which require a lot of care. Plant fewer varieties of flowers but plant in masses and sweeps; add easy-care plants to fill in empty spaces. Group plants with similar moisture needs together. Instead of mulch, add a spreading, low ground-cover to fill in an area. Foliage plants can tie everything together and serve to unify the "look" of the garden while reducing upkeep. Consider using raised beds to give the garden definite boundaries. Upgrade your tools to the new ergonomic products which take some of the bending out of garden work. Lastly, simplify watering by using drip or soaker hoses ... in a drought situation, water will not be wasted.

Editing a garden/landscape is an on-going proposition as plants mature and grow and the surrounding landscape changes. Gardeners and gardens learn to change and adapt together!

## **New Nursery Selections**

Acer Gardens is excited about the many new plant introductions/cultivars we will be offering for this coming season. What is lovelier than an apple tree in full bloom? Your own apple tree in bloom, getting ready to give you your very own apples in the fall! The Nursery has a wide variety of hardy apple trees: self-fertile, dwarf, semi-dwarf and espaliered. Apple trees will be available in mid-May. Here are some worthy of attention:

### **'Mutsu Crispin' (Semi-Dwarf)**

Zone: 5-9      Height: 6-9'      Spread:12-15'

Yellow apples are very large and crisp, ripening fully in October. Considered powdery mildew resistant. Excellent for both eating and cooking.

### **'Northpole' (Columnar)**

Zone: 4-8'      Height: 6-9'      Spread:8-10'

Large, red-skinned apples resemble the McIntosh variety, ripening in August. They are juicy, crisp and very aromatic.

## **‘Scarlet Sentinel’ (Columnar)**

Zone: 4-8'      Height: 8-12'      Spread:

Large, greenish-yellow fruit has a red blush. Ripening in September, this apple can be grown in a large container.

## **‘Fuji’ (Espaliered)**

Zone: 4-9      Height: 10-15'      Spread: 8-10'

Ripening in September, this apple requires no pollinator and is sweet, crisp and flavorful. It takes up very little room when espaliered.

## **Herbs**

Natural pest control is high on everyone’s want list these days and many botanists have concentrated recently on producing disease resistant herb and vegetable varieties, less prone to blights and mildews. Acer Gardens features both Basil and Rosemary plants with high resistance to Downy and other Mildews. Give these herbs good air circulation and pick steadily throughout the season!

Patchouli (non-edible and used in aromatherapy/perfume making) can be planted as a natural insect repellent near the herb garden. Grow in partial sun.

Corsican Mint is a strong smelling, bright green, creeping groundcover (you can actually step on it so many gardeners use it on or near their terraces.) Like many mints, it serves as a natural repellent ... not just to insects but also to mice. Give it partial sun, average to moist soil and water as needed.

## **Vegetables**

Asparagus can be grown from seed but the Nursery is offering 1-year old “crowns” to get you off to a faster start. It will still take several years before you harvest asparagus spears but it’s always worth the wait!

This year, the Nursery has added ready-to-plant seed potatoes to its vegetable inventory. Plant them in full sun, well-spaced in well-drained soil. Potatoes can be planted in rows but also do well in grow bags.

Onion sets will also be available, ready to produce the earliest onions! Growing from onion sets saves time as the crop will be ready in 40-60 days. Make sure the soil is warm, at least 45°F, before you plant.

Soft-neck garlic matures a little earlier than hard-neck varieties and tends to produce more cloves. Plant them 3-4 inches deep, 6" apart, with the pointy ends up.

## **Fertilizing and Mulching Basics**

All plants need nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium, nutrients essential to helping plants make healthy leaves, develop strong roots and digest their food. Although these elements are usually present in the soil, the wise gardener knows that soil changes over time and the nutrients must be replenished. The home gardener must choose between granular or water-soluble fertilizer. Granular fertilizer delivers food slowly but lasts a long time. Water soluble fertilizers are faster acting but must be applied more frequently.

Most bushes and trees like an application of granular fertilizer in early spring. Annuals like additional boosts of water-soluble fertilizer throughout the growing season. Wait until the ground has really warmed up before you fertilize perennials, annuals and vegetables. Roses are always hungry and will benefit from the application of light soluble fertilizer every other week during their blooming season. Don't apply fertilizer on wet or windy days ... it will only be wasted.

Decorative mulches are an essential part of low-maintenance landscapes, offering many benefits to your plants and soil. They reduce the amount of water lost through evaporation, keep the soil cooler during the heat of the summer, suppress weed growth and help control erosion. Decomposing over time, mulches add nutrients and organic matter to the soil. There are a few general rules:

- Do not place mulch directly against plant stems or tree bases.  
Apply mulch layers no more than 1-3" thick.  
Thoroughly water newly installed wood or bark mulches.  
Don't automatically renew mulch every year --- assess your needs realistically.

## **Plants we Grow “Just Because”!**

Planning and organizing a garden depends largely on using common sense ... but now and then a gardener is attracted to a plant for no particular reason and has to have it, somewhere, whether it fits in or not! Staff at Acer Gardens is no different from other gardeners and all grow at least one plant or shrub "just because" ... and some grow more than one! Here are some examples of recent "had to have it" choices:

## Perennials

## Centranthus ruber (Valerian)

This long-blooming perennial grows well in full sun and produces, even in poor soil, a steady show of fragrant, star-shaped crimson, pink or white flowers. It naturalizes well, attracts butterflies and will self-seed. Tolerant of drought conditions. Remove spent flower stems to encourage additional bloom.

## Darmera peltata (Umbrella Plant)

Easily grown in part to full shade, this plant (native to mountain stream banks and woodlands) tolerates wet soil and would be at home in a rain garden. Its showy white flowers stand out from the leaves. Upward-facing leaves actually collect and hold rainwater.

## Astrantia major (Masterwort)

Blooming from spring well into summer, this plant's white, pink or rose flowers rise well above the foliage. Happy in part shade, *Astrantia* will naturalize well and form clumps which should be divided every 4-5 years. Tolerant of wet soil, they are not happy in drought conditions so water them well and often.

## **Saponaria officinalis (Soapwort)**

Zone 3-8

Height: 6"

Spread: 18-24"

This plant features trailing foliage with fragrant pink flowers blooming from late spring to early summer. Notable for being deer resistant, attractive to butterflies and pollinators, and tolerant of dry sites. Plant in full sun and divide every 3-5 years in early spring.

## **Annuals**

### **Spilanthes (Peek-a-Boo Plant)**

Zone 9-11

Height: 12-15"

Spread: 18"

Native to the tropics, Spilanthes are mounding, spreading plants producing unusual golden-yellow flowers with deep burgundy eyes. Very showy when massed, they are useful stand-outs in the cutting garden but also combine well with many container plants. Give them full sun to partial shade and avoid over-watering.

### **Tithonia (Mexican Sunflower)**

Zone 9-11

Height: 4-6'

Spread: 2-3'

A member of the daisy family, Tithonia produces large bright red to orange flowers on thick stems from mid-summer until frost. Drought tolerant, these flowers shine at the back of mixed borders full of bright colors. Tithonia grows best in full sun and is attractive to birds, butterflies and hummingbirds.

## **Shrubs**

### **Cephalanthus occidentalis (Buttonbush)**

Zone 5-9

Height: 5-12'

Spread: 4-8'

Naturalize this bush in woodland gardens, low spots or on the edge of ponds and streams. Easily grown in full sun to part shade, native buttonbush adapts to moist to wet soils. Tiny, fragrant white flowers appear in mid to late summer, followed by fruits which often last through the winter.

### **Diervilla lonicera (Bush Honeysuckle)**

Zone 3-7

Height: 3'

Spread: 3'

Planted on a slope, Diervilla will spread to form colonies but can also be used as a small hedge or in shrub borders. Small yellow flowers appear in June and July; butterflies and hummingbirds cannot resist this shrub which suckers freely and tolerates drought. Prune after flowering if needed.

## Timing Flowering Shrubs

It is possible to have a variety of bushes flowering from April into October, providing a background for your perennial beds, screening for the vegetable garden and privacy for sitting areas, decks and terraces. Using bushes is an easy way to reduce garden maintenance as many take care of themselves with a minimum of tweaking. They work well in a variety of settings, especially as a transition plant between the garden and woodlands or as a specimen plant. Gardeners are also using new, compact forms of bushes within flower beds or at the back of a bed. Many of them have foliage down to the ground and provide texture even when they are not in bloom. Some can also be grown in large containers although watering will have to be carefully monitored. Here's a broad list of some possible choices; individual cultivars may have slightly different bloom times.

Bush	Bloom Time	Bush	Bloom Time
Corylopsis spicata	March	Viburnum	May – Oct.
Forsythia	April	Spirea	June
Azalea	April	Clethra	July - August
Rhododendron	May	Abelia	July – Sept.
Lilac	May	Buddleia	July – Sept.
Daphne	May	Hydrangea	July – Sept.
Deutzia	May	Callicarpa	August
Weigela	May – Sept.		

## Ground Covers

Groundcovers are often used to cover problem areas and to unify divergent components in the landscape. They can serve as traffic barriers and visual guides as well as define space. They can add color and texture, soften hardscaping, partner with taller plants and minimize garden maintenance very quickly. Whole hillsides have been covered in plants acting as ground cover ... everything from heathers, junipers and roses ... but to most gardeners a groundcover serves to deal with a difficult area in an existing garden. Consider the height of the plant you choose in relation to the space you are covering and decide if you want an evergreen look or are content to see your groundcover die back in the winter. A good ground cover should spread by itself and develop into a dense cover, inhibiting weeds.

Low growing groundcovers will fill the spaces between pavers or flagstones, replace small patches of hard-to-mow lawn and eliminate the need for mulch. Heavy, dense shade can be covered with a selection of mosses. Using groundcovers can eliminate lawn completely in small, confined spaces. Planted around shrubs, groundcovers serve to retain moisture, control weeds and define the shape of a garden bed. Almost none of them want to be fussed over (some can even take limited foot traffic) and therefore make few demands on a gardener's time. Adding organic matter to the soil before planting will give your ground cover a good base. Spring or early summer planting allows the groundcover plants to establish themselves and settle in. When planting under trees use shallow-rooted plants. Pachysandra, Myrtle, Ivy and Vinca all give a very traditional look but there are many other dependable groundcovers, including:

### Partial Shade Ground Covers

Asarum (Wild Ginger)	Spreads via rhizomes
Epimedium (Barrenworts)	Needs good drainage
Galium (Sweet woodruff)	Spreads rapidly
Gaultheria procumbens (Wintergreen)	Red fruits in the autumn

Iris cristata (Dwarf crested iris)	Naturalizes
Lirope (Lilyturf)	Deer-resistant
Lysimachia nummularia (Creeping Jenny)	Doesn't mind wet sites
Lamiastrum (Archangel)	Rapid Spreader

### Sun-loving Ground Covers

Carex (Sedge)	Can tolerate dry shade
Juniperus (Creeping Juniper)	Holds slopes; evergreen
Sagina sublata	Resembles moss. Blooms
Sedum (Stonecrop)	Takes drought and winds

### The Shady Side

A shade garden is often a woodland garden, existing beneath the canopy which creates the shade needed for the plants to grow and thrive. Adding shade-loving shrubs, even some specimen understory trees, can provide more color and texture. Since a woodland garden is naturalistic by design and layered by its very nature, the plants you use in the front of your shade garden will pull everything together! Repetition will keep the shade garden from looking like ordinary woods and the use of a ground cover will pull everything together.

Experienced gardeners depend on the contrasts between bold and delicate foliage textures to give a shade garden interest and depth. Large masses of plants are very effective in shade gardens, helping to create curving shapes and draping over paths. Ferns and Hostas always give a wide range of options, especially with some of the exciting new cultivars. To get the best results, provide moist, well-drained, organic soil and filtered or dappled sunlight. Morning sun can often be tolerated. You can choose to:

- Vary the color of green but use leaves similar in shape
- Bring a sense of drama to a shade bed with bright, variegated or green-striped leaves
- Shift focus from plant to plant and add interest with feathery leaves
- Depend on the occasional vertical element to add excitement and punch up the mounding shapes which are a feature of many shade plants.

### Ferns

Some of the oldest plants in the world, Ferns contribute to a gardener's landscape in a wide variety of ways. Most thrive in part to full shade (although some can handle dappled morning sun), prefer an enriched, water-retentive soil and respond well to an early spring application of a slow-release fertilizer. Native and woodland gardens really showcase ferns ... the contrasts between the bold or delicate foliage of selected ferns can highlight your shade garden all season long. Best of all: they are deer and vole resistant!

### Hostas

Lush foliage, extended bloom times and low maintenance make Hostas a permanent favorite with shade gardeners. Few Hostas will do well in direct sunlight but their different sun/shade requirements depend very much on the color of the leaves. The lighter the foliage, the more sunlight the plant will accept but all Hostas need some shade in order to thrive and mature. Give them rich organic well-drained soil and fertilize in the spring with an all-purpose garden fertilizer. Effective when massed, Hostas can also be unique specimen plants in the garden ... new cultivars feature a growing range of bloom colors. They can take 4-8 years to mature so be sure to give them plenty of spreading room and divide when appropriate!

Although Hostas will give you summer blooms, there are also other perennials which tolerate varying levels of shade and can give you late summer bloom if you choose carefully. Here are two late season shade bloomers for you to consider:

### **Ligularia (Leopard Plant)**

Zone 4 - 8                    Height: 3 - 6'                    Spread: 2 - 4'

July and August in the shade garden can be very colorful with showy Ligularia daisy-like blooms towering over under plantings. This plant must have moist soil in partial shade in order to thrive or it will wilt. All Ligularia leaves are dramatic in shape.

### **Kirengeshoma palmata (Waxbells)**

Zone 5 - 8                    Height: 3 - 4'                    Spread: 2 - 3'

This bushy late bloomer is a dramatic presence in the shade garden! Starting in August and continuing into September, clusters of small yellow flowers appear, hanging downward like little bells. The dramatic leaves are an outstanding contrast to the foliage of hostas and ferns.

## **Often-asked Questions**

### **I love popping tulip bulbs into my garden bed at random but I don't like to look at the fading foliage as the bloom fades. How can I disguise that?**

The easiest way to disguise "that look" is to mingle the tulips with plants which are not in bloom at the same time. Because the surrounding plants will bloom much later there will not be a color contrast problem and the growing leaves will cover up the spent tulip foliage. Consider using Alliums, Daylilies, Siberian Iris, Geranium, Catmint or Sedum.

### **Since we have to wait awhile for the roses to bloom, what are the earliest flowering bushes we could plant?**

Many shrubs, sited carefully and protected from the worst of winter, bloom surprisingly early and can give you a wide range of colors, starting with Hamamelis (Witch Hazel), Erica carnea (Winter Heath) and Pieris japonica (Andromeda). Then comes Chaenomeles speciosa (Flowering Quince), Forsythia, Corylopsis (Winter Hazel), and Lindera (Spice Bush). You could also add Fothergilla, Daphne and a wide range of Viburnums ... and all will bloom before you get to the Lilacs!

### **We have a new house with a small pond. What can we plant around it and still keep the "natural" look?**

Keep it simple and use plants with an open look to their shape and foliage so that your eye is directed to the pond but not distracted by the shape of the plant material. You will want them to work together. Good choices include Iris versicolor (Blueflag Iris), Lobelia cardinalis (Cardinal Flower), Ligularia, Hibiscus marshmallow (Swamp Rose Mallow), Asclepias incarnata (Swamp Milkweed), Native Sedges and Rushes, Red and Yellow Stem Dogwoods, Clethra alnifolia (Summersweet) and Buttonbush. These plants have long bloom times and butterflies will quickly be attracted to them. Leave lots of spreading room and open space to showcase the natural look of the plants.

## **Sometimes my hollyhocks bloom the following year and sometimes they don't? Why?**

Hollyhocks are actually biennials, blooming every summer because they have self-seeded with abandon! If they are happy in their location, they will just keep going. If you plant new Hollyhocks in August or September they will probably bloom the following summer. The plants need full sun, moist, well-drained soil, protection from wind and support for those tall stalks.

## **Are there any container plants that don't need any fertilizing? I'm really busy all summer!**

There are some super-easy plants that thrive without any fertilizer and will, in fact, fail to bloom if they are over-fed! Try Celosia, Cosmos, Bedding Dahlias, Marigold, Nasturtium, Sweet William and Vinca.

## **What can I do to be more “green” in my water usage?**

Try grouping plants into “water usage” areas so that watering needs will be consistent. Improving the soil and using regionally suitable plants (both native and adapted) will help your garden thrive. Light mulch will help capture rainwater, suppress weeds and encourage deep root growth. Water deeply once a week to encourage more drought-tolerant roots. Use soaker and drip hoses to minimize water loss through evaporation. If possible, capture water from downspouts with rain barrels.

## **When can my houseplants go outside?**

As the weather begins to warm, many gardeners itch to get their houseplants outside for the summer. A good rule of thumb is to wait until nighttime temperatures are consistently above 50 degrees. Many houseplants are native to tropical or sub-tropical climates and will need time to adapt to a new environment.

Before your plant goes outside check to see if it needs re-potting into the next larger pot size. This is also a good time to see if your plants need light pruning or reshaping. Add a little fresh potting mix to each plant as some of its soil will have decomposed over the winter. When large plants go outside for the summer they may need additional staking to better cope with wind. When the plants go outside, place them in a partially shaded spot for at least 10 days. Once they have adjusted to more light, the plants can be moved to a sunny location in the garden or on the patio. You may need to water the plants daily and change your fertilizing schedule. It's a good idea to inspect the houseplants periodically in case bugs or insects are causing problems.

## **Is there a preferred way to plant tomato seedlings?**

Unlike most other plants, tomato seedlings actually like to have half of their stems covered with soil at planting time. The stems will not rot but will grow even more roots and develop a strong root system to take in water and nutrients. If you are going to stake your plants, do so at planting time to avoid any future root damage.

## **What's the best way to keep ahead of weeds in the vegetable garden?**

The time to attack potential weeds in the vegetable garden is early! The painting sections in hardware stores carry a black plastic which is much better than the “weed” fabric sold. Spread out, with the edges secured by rocks and the soil tilled up around it, it helps to warm up the soil and does not allow light penetration. This arrangement is ideal for squash, cucumbers, tomatoes, eggplant, and peppers. Just dig a hole through the plastic and insert the plant.

The area outside the black plastic sheet can be reserved for sowing seeds such as peas, lettuce, spinach, radishes, beets and/or carrots and string beans. As they become seedlings, mulch with newspaper and straw (not hay). You may still get a few weeds but they will be highly visible and easy to deal with. As summer progresses and you begin harvesting, mulch your bare areas with straw, renewing it if needed.

## **Adding Spires to a Garden Bed**

Sometimes our gardens are full of bright clumps and soft outlines but we need a little drama and punctuation, something that says “Hey, look over here! See these lovely blooming flowers … I’m just drawing your attention to how well it’s going!” And that is what spires do … they add elegance to a border, punctuate established flower clumps and shapes and provide the accent mark in a full bed. Many spire-blooming plants are extremely tough and can easily stand on their own even when surrounded by billowing shapes and soft fillers. The interplay between the various shapes can take building a border to a new level. Even part-shade will accommodate some spires: *Adenophora* (Common Ladybells), for instance, gives dependable bloom in late spring and early summer. Perhaps you have room to try out a few spires in your own garden:

Actaea	(Doll’s Eyes)	Kniphofia	(Red-hot Poker)
Adenophora	(Ladybells)	Liatris	(Gayfeather)
Agastache	(Anise Hyssop)	Ligularia	(Leopard Plant)
Antirrhinum majus	(Snapdragon)	Lupine	(Lupine)
Astilbe	(Astilbe)	Salvia	(Meadow Sage)
Baptisia	(Blue False Indigo)	Verbascum	(Mullein)
Delphinium	(Delphinium)	Veronica	(Speedwell)
Digitalis purpurea	(Foxglove)	Veronicastrum	(Culver’s Root)

## **Growing Great Plants**

### **Siberian Iris**

Increasingly popular, Siberian Iris grow from fibrous roots and tolerate a wide range of soil conditions. They will take some shade (although they prefer full sunlight) and are not bothered by general iris problems. Blooming in blues, purple, maroon, white, pink and yellow in late spring, Siberians produce arching leaves which stay green all summer and provide a graceful, filling “look” in a flower bed long after the blooms have faded. They can be divided or planted in either spring or late summer. Given lots of growing room, they actually need to be divided every 3-4 years or bloom will diminish. With the cooler fall weather, leaves may yellow and die back. Remove the foliage and let the plant go dormant for the winter.

Siberians can also be grown in containers. Use good quality, well-drained soil and site your containers where they will get a full day’s sun. After bloom, the leaves remain as strong accents. At this point, many gardeners tuck in annuals around the perimeter of the pot.

### **Hardy Geranium (Cranesbill)**

Colorful, hardy Geraniums bloom from mid-spring to fall and are the perfect “tuck-in” plant. They prefer well-drained soil and do best in morning sun with afternoon shade; they make excellent companions to a wide variety of plants because of their mounding habit. Some cultivars become flowering groundcovers or tuck-ins in rock gardens. Some of the looser-branched cultivars are wonderful fillers in perennial beds with their airy branches interweaving with other plants and they will help hide the “bare knees” of other plants. A slow release fertilizer used at the start of the summer will see these plants through the growing season but because they were once wildflowers they don’t expect much coddling.

Perennial Geraniums are easily divided when the center of a mature plant appears open with a new ring of growth around it. You can dig chunks from the edges of the plant or lift the entire plant and section, disposing of the woody center. The best time to do this is early Spring or after the plant has bloomed. If you cut the plants down to 4" when bloom is over new foliage will quickly grow from the base. Reliable favorites include: 'Rozanne', 'Ballerina', 'Johnson's Blue', 'Fay Anna', and 'Espresso'.

## **Edging Plants**

Paying attention to "details" can give your garden a polished look. Edging plants can complete the picture of your garden beds but can also define path, driveways and lawn edges. Their function is to outline, frame or add contrast to the surrounding borders, lawns or hardscapes. They add ribbons of color or foliage and texture. The one constant should be using multiple plants of one type around each section of the garden. Most edging plants are small and neat and mounding but any plant can be an edger as long as you keep its space and height under control. The key is to choose plants that will fill in without running rampant. If you choose flowering plants as edgers be sure the foliage is attractive for the non-bloom season. You can use annuals and experiment with color or you can select plants that echo the colors in the border itself which produce a unified look.

### **Sun Loving Edgers**

Iberis	Candytuft	8"
Lavender	Lavender	12"
Pennisetum	Dwarf fountain grass	12-18"
Phlox subulata	Moss pink	4-6"
Sedum	Stonecrop	4-8"

### **Shade Loving Edgers**

Asarum	European wild ginger	3-6"
Astilbe	Astilbe	10"
Brunnera	Brunnera	12"
Heuchera	Coral Bells	8"
Lirope	Lilyturf	8"-18"
Tiarella	Foam flower	6"
Hakonechloa	Japanese forest grass	12-18"

### **Annuals for Edging**

Ageratum	4-6"
Allysum	3-5"
Dusty Miller	12-18"
Impatiens	12"
Verbena	6-12"

## **Plant these Now to Put the "Wow" in Fall!**

Looking ahead and planning for the future is part of the gardening year. By June, the garden is so full and lush that it seems odd to be thinking about late summer and fall but now is exactly the right time to think about how to fill that late summer garden with dependable, care-free color. Growing and combining Asters with other traditional Fall bloomers will give you a wide range of colors, shapes, sizes, and heights ... and they'll keep blooming until the killing frosts come!

## **Asters**

Asters bring a steady presence to the fall garden. Available in a wide range of size, shape and color, their long period of bloom (late summer through fall) and wide height range make them invaluable in mixed beds. Mingling well with other fall perennials, Asters establish themselves easily, thrive in average soil and will take sun to partial shade. Some bloom in clouds of pale colors; others flaunt deep shades of purple. All combine well with native plants. Cutting the plants back in early June will prevent “Aster sprawl”. Divide the plants every 3-5 years to keep them under control and remove unwanted seedlings as you spot them.

## **Japanese Anemone (Windflowers)**

With a long blooming season (6 weeks or more starting in late August), Japanese Anemones produce masses of white, pink or purple flowers held well above their slender stems. The clumping plants appear delicate but, once established, require minimal maintenance and will naturalize to form colonies. Happy in full sun to part shade, these salt tolerant plants prefer evenly moist, well-drained soil ... do not let the soil dry out ... and are attractive to late butterflies but deer and rabbit resistant.

## **Helenium (Sneezeweed)**

As a native plant, Helenium can be found growing in moist, low-lying meadows. They prefer medium to wet soils and, grown in full sun, quickly reach 3-5', producing a range of yellow, gold, orange and red flowers from August to October. Cut back in early June to control height and encourage branching. Long-lasting cut flowers, Helenium combines well with asters and sedum.

## **Sedum (Stonecrop)**

Easily grown in dry to medium well-drained soil, in full sun, Sedum is a clump-forming perennial which produces tiny flowers from September through October and often well beyond. A great favorite for drying, the flowers last a long time and can be left on the plant to add interest to the late fall garden. Bees and butterflies are very fond of the nectar produced by these plants. Mature plants are easily divided in the spring.

## **Cimicifuga (Bugbane)**

This amazing flower brings height to the autumn garden with plumes of tiny, star-like white flowers rising from dark-green foliage from September through October and often into November. (Some cultivars bloom in mid-summer.) Easily grown in partial to full shade, Cimicifuga is happiest in rich, moisture-retentive soil and forms attractive clumps. Planted in groups, this perennial adds height and late bloom to the fall garden but single plants can also make a statement.

## **Ornamental Grasses**

Late season ornamental grasses help your garden's fall landscape by adding soft colors and textures as a backdrop to more brilliant colors. As the fall season progresses, most ornamental grasses turn golden and, uncut, provide a source of food and shelter for over-wintering birds. Many grasses have dwarf cultivars and are suitable for adding to flower beds or even containers. They require sun but tolerate a wide range of soils.

Try:

- Muhlenbergia capillaries (Pink Muhlygrass)
- Panicum virgatum (Switch Grass)
- Pennisetum alopecuroides (Fountain Grass)
- Miscanthus sinensis (Maiden Grass)

## Garden Containers

It's time to think about containers again! This year, the nursery is featuring several new lines of unusual containers. Acer Gardens will have many pre-planted containers for you to choose from but, of course, you can bring your own empty container to the nursery and staff will be happy to help you design something just right for your garden. Maybe it's time to try a container featuring just one color but using varying shades of that color. Looking at a color wheel will give you some idea of complimentary as well as dramatic colors which might fit into your over-all garden plan. Containers can be used to lead the eye along a path, to frame a view or to cover-up a temporary "hole". The possibilities are almost endless! You can change the look of your containers at will by changing the plantings. Troughs and containers have the advantage of portability and can be moved around the garden as the season advances or as "holes" develop.

Many gardeners find that elevating a container by placing it on a pedestal gives the container greater impact in the garden and really shows off trailing flowers. Placing more containers around the elevated one can create a further dramatic effect and make a real statement. Be sure the pedestal is securely anchored so that it won't blow over and that the container itself is heavy and won't wiggle.

Accurate watering is key to growing good containers as is a good ratio of plant to pot. Think about where your containers will be placed as you choose your plants. Containers for decks and terraces will be on view 24/7 so they can be made to reflect how you choose to entertain or become extensions of the larger garden. A container sited for the "wow" factor can be filled to over-flowing with wild colors and luxurious blossom and you should feel free to depart from your normal style. After all, if it doesn't work it's easy to change. Be sure that all your container plants share the same sun, soil and water requirements and set up a realistic fertilizing schedule. Some gardeners prefer to use a potting mix with fertilizer already mixed in for their containers and eliminate the need for additional feedings. If you do use fertilizers, remember to water first before you feed ... the plants will absorb nutrients better. (By the way: the best weeder for closely-planted containers is still an old grapefruit knife!) Many gardeners photograph their containers as the season advances and keep them to use as guides for next year.

## The Vegetable Garden

This year, Acer Gardens has further expanded its vegetable and herb selections. Plotting out your garden first on graph paper will help you establish boundaries and maximize your available space. Rotating your crop's positions from year to year will give you better yields. If you are using rows be sure to leave access routes for weeding and fertilizing. Nursery staff will be happy to help you choose what you need to make your vegetable growing a pleasure.

Many vegetables can be planted as soon as you can work the soil. Leaf lettuces, such as Black Seeded Simpson, are harvested young and re-planting every 2 – 3 weeks will keep you harvesting into fall. The nursery now carries pre-blended lettuce varieties. Arugula, cilantro, and spinach will also continue producing on a similar schedule but do not re-plant in the heat of the summer. Radishes, a fast and easy grower, can be planted in short rows at 2 – 3 week intervals. Spring is the optimum time to direct sow or plant peas, broccoli, cauliflower, beets, cabbage, leeks, carrots, parsley, onions, Swiss chard, kale and micro-greens. Try the rainbow beets ... an intriguing mix of colors!

Late May is a good time to plant cucumbers, tomatoes, corn, peppers, melons, pumpkins, and squash. Plant basil near the tomatoes to discourage the insects that feed on them. Alyssum, Nasturtiums and Marigolds planted in the vegetable garden will fend off many aphids, thrips and beetles and will protect your squash and pumpkin crops. 'Florence' onions can be planted now and will hold well in the vegetable garden. Now is the time to plant single bulb shallots. 'Conservor' is an outstanding choice, with a high, round shape suitable for long storage. Plant in early to mid-spring and harvest in summer when the tops fall and begin to brown. Dry in an airy place until ready to use.

The wide-ranging herb selection keeps expanding and now includes Stevia (the sugar substitute), Lemon Grass, a wide range of Thymes, Lemon Verbena (the leaves are wonderful in water or iced tea) and Lemon Basil, which is resistant to downy mildew. Thai Basil will be available again (try it with fish as well as using the leaves in oriental dishes.) Other mildew-resistant basil will include 'Devotion' and 'Passion' as well as 'Genovese' (which makes superb pesto). Oregano 'Hot and Spicy' will add a mild chile pepper flavor to Mexican dishes. Most herbs will do well in patio and deck containers but Thai Basil should be grown in a separate pot as it needs to dry out between waterings.

Herbs can be more than kitchen companions to the vegetables you grow. Think about inter-planting herbs and vegetables in the garden. (Harvesting dinner will be easy!) Try basil and tomatoes, chives, and carrots, rosemary and beans. Marjoram, oregano, sage, and tarragon enhance many vegetables. Grow dill separately as it needs a lot of spreading room and successive plantings.

Acer Gardens now offers many seed varieties of popular gourmet vegetables and annuals (some of which have almost vanished from supermarket produce departments.) It's best to pick these up early to make sure your choice is still available.

Acer Gardens' Information sheet on **Growing Vegetables** is available on the web site and at the nursery.

## **Growing Great Tomatoes**

Tomatoes annually rank as the #1 home garden crop ... with every justification. Nothing tastes better than a ripe tomato, still warm from the sun! Although technically a fruit, every vegetable garden welcomes a tomato plant but many new varieties are also suitable for patio pot culture.

Before you choose your tomato plant you have a few decisions to make: do you want tomatoes for sauce or slicing? (Bush varieties are more compact and tend to fruit all at once which is useful if you make a lot of sauce; other plants will produce steadily until the first frost but grow taller and will need staking or cages.)

Tomatoes require full sun all day (7 hours a day is not too much) and really good air circulation around each individual plant. Do not plant your tomatoes too soon but let the soil warm to 60-65 degrees Fahrenheit. Amend soil with compost prior to planting. Water the soil, not the leaves, and water deeply every 5 days, depending on the weather... tomatoes will happily take 1-2" of water a week. For maximum returns, prune-off non-fruiting branches as the plant grows. Protect from frost with a blanket of mulch. Tomatoes really like warm nights!

Store picked tomatoes at room temperature, indoors.

## **General Reminders**

The Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station will answer inquiries on lawn problems (860 683-4977), soil testing (203 974-8521) and plant disease issues. (203 974-8601.)

Acer Gardens  
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