

SILVER PLANTS SAVE THE DAY

Vera Strader

I make it up as I go—my garden that is. I've never drawn up a plan nor thought through color schemes. My garden just happens. I'm careful to place plants where they will get proper sun, water, and drainage, and I don't hesitate to move them if they are displeased. Other design considerations are thrown to the wind. Rarely do I worry about repetition of color to be aesthetically pleasing and there are no drifts of this and that to create "visual rhythm."

I like to think of myself as a free-spirited gardener. I add color where I see gaps and am always willing to create new spots for seed or nectar-producing finds to support hungry wild creatures. I treasure perennials shared by old and new friends alike, and plants grown from seeds collected here and there. Somehow they must all get along together, for I give them no choice.

But, even my eclectic garden sensibilities are occasionally offended by these offbeat combinations. My solution is simple—add silver-leafed plants wherever needed for continuity and for softening dissonant hues. A silvery dusty miller alongside my overheated magenta-blossomed geraniums cooled them to a slow simmer; soothing mounds of other silver plants add continuity, and yes, even visual rhythm.

SILVER PLANTS HAVE MANY CHARMS

Silver, white, and grey appearing leaves are among our toughest garden plants. Many are resistant to drought, their color created by a leaf covering of countless small hairs that reduce water loss and protect the leaves from the relentless sun. Some even bear the term "tomentosum" as part of their official species name, indicating that they are hairy. Other names include the term "albifrons" or "argentea," denoting a white or silvery color. Many of these plants are furry enough to be downright pettable, if you are so inclined that is.

I am just as enamored by the fragrance of jasmine and old roses as the next person. Fragrance, however, is a very personal thing; I find the aroma of some of our silvery plants to also have a charm of their own. In fact, silver plants are among our most distinctively-scented garden plants.

I often follow my nose when I go along the nursery aisle, stroking the silvery and grey specimens to check leaf aroma. (This is much more satisfying than petting a rose bush.) I place the aromatic plants I especially like near paths where I will frequently brush by them.

Another charm commonly shared by silver plants is their unattractiveness to deer which apparently find their hairy texture and aroma less than appetizing. Silver plants (and other plants too) are often more deer resistant if, after they are established, they are watered sparingly, thereby reducing fresh, succulent, deer-attracting new growth.

Here are some silver perennials that thrive in my yard:

GROUNDCOVERS

- Woolly yarrow (*Achillea tomentosa*) with yellow flowers; also look for silvery yarrow (*A. argentea*) with white flowers; both less than 10 inches tall.
- Lambs' ears (*Stachys byzantina*), strikingly furry leaves; insignificant flowers. To 1-1/2 ft. tall. *Stachys* 'Big Ears' has even larger, more pettable leaves.
- Bees bliss sage (*Salvia* 'Bees Bliss') is a foot or so tall with lavender-blue flowers; it will happily spread while rooting over an area several feet wide, drawing busy pollinators to your yard.
- Snow in summer (*Cerastium tomentosum*), a low spreader with white flowers that appreciates a little shade and water.

LOW MOUNDING PLANTS, Two to three feet high

- Lavender cotton (*Santolina* spp.) with charming small yellow button flowers.
- *Artemisia* 'Powis Castle,' powerfully aromatic; a strong grower and readily available. Also other *Artemisia* spp.
- Dusty miller (*Senecio cineraria*), cream-colored or yellow flowers.
- *Chrysanthemum pacificum*; a late bloomer but not your standard chrysanthemum; small yellow button-like flowers.

SMALL UPRIGHT SHRUBS

- White or bee sage (*Salvia apiana*) is a robust grower to perhaps 5 ft.; pungently aromatic.
- Silver lupine (*Lupinus albifrons*) is our native, fragrant, blue-flowered lupine. Very structural with age. With luck, it will self-sow in your yard.

Look for other silvery plants available in our nurseries. Consider also the many excellent perennials with subtle grey coloring such as lavender, sunroses (*Helianthemum* spp.), sages, and various grasses. Before purchasing, be sure to determine if a new plant will be happy in your garden's elevation and growing conditions.

Established silver plants will endure though dry spells, glisten in the morning and evening light, and sparkle with frost and rain drops. Add a few for beauty and aroma; perhaps you too will take pleasure in petting your favorites.

Vera Strader, plants, putters, and welcomes wildlife in her relaxed, country-style Sonora yard.