Foliage Accent Plants for Outdoors

One of the most important elements in making any garden planting work is the use of plants that are valued primarily for their foliage instead of their blooms. The careful use of foliage plants can highlight and enhance the flowers that you do use or even other types of foliage. Luckily, the horticulture world is offering more and more plants that fit this unique niche in the garden. Now it is up to us to learn what each plant will do and what it needs to be happy.

While the plants listed here are grown primarily for their foliage, many of them do develop some form of flowers, often so inconspicuous you might not even notice them. The general rule is that when you are growing plants for their foliage, it is best to pinch out any flowers you notice. This will keep them actively producing new foliage longer into the season.

Below is a listing of some of the plants that can be used outdoors in ground plantings as well as in containers. Some you will recognize because you have seen them around for a few years. Others might be new to you. Once you start incorporating these magical plants into your garden, you'll start to see there are hundreds of other plants that can be used for just this same purpose. Don't let your imagination be limited by what you find readily available in garden centers. If you think it will look good, give it a try!

Asparagus Fern
Both the regular asparagus fern and the foxtail asparagus ferns make attractive additions to mixed containers. Regular (aka sprengeri) asparagus fern develops loose arching branches with soft, green foliage. Foxtail (aka Meyeri) asparagus ferns sport bushy upright stems with the same soft green foliage. Both types need lots of light to grow well but will tolerate some shade. Once established, they are very drought tolerant. They can be successfully interplanted with almost every plant in containers.

Candlestick Vine
Along with other types of Swedish ivy, candlestick vines are types of Plectranthus. This variety offers attractive variegation and a cascading habit as it matures. It also has a very distinctive "fragrance" that you may want to consider if you are planting it where you will brush up against it. Candlestick vine needs strong light to do well and is best planted in containers.

Coleus
Here is a plant that has been reinvented. The new varieties are often referred to as sun coleus since they will tolerate sun as well as shade. The new coleus varieties offer many unique colorations and are very slow to flower. Plants are upright and range from 8-10" (the small duckfoot varieties) to 2-3'. They can easily be pinched to contain their size. The new coleus are so beautiful they can either be used as a companion plant or as the focal point of a planting.
Dracaena aka Spike
Tall, narrow, gracefully arching leaves emerging from a central spot make this plant a great focal point and source of height in planters. Spike dracaena will be fullest in the most sun but does almost as well in shade.

German Ivy
A longtime favorite for its abundance of draping, glossy green ivy-like leaves, German ivy does best in light shade. It can be hard to keep healthy in full sun. German ivy is brittle and does not like to be touched, so be sure to plant it away from the traffic. Best in containers where it can drape.

Lamium
There are several new types and new uses for the old standard groundcover lamium. Varieties such as White Nancy and Orchid Frost offer pale green and silver variegation while other varieties have yellow highlights. All lamiums have sprawling habits and can be effectively used both in the ground and in containers. Their blooms can be considered a short-lived bonus (don't pinch them off).

Licorice Vine
Helichrysum petiolare Featured in hundreds of container plantings over the past few years, this plant is prized for its soft gray, fuzzy foliage on arching stems that readily interlace themselves with the surrounding plants. In addition to the standard variety, you can now find a miniature version and a version called Limelight with soft chartreuse foliage. Licorice vine needs lots of light to be full but will also do well in light shade.

Lotus Vine
Unique even among this group of unusual plants, lotus vine offers long, arching branches covered with tufts of very fine, grayish-green foliage. Give it lots of light and good drainage. It can be grown from seed or transplants. Plant it where it will have lots of room to drape. Under the right circumstance, it may bloom with some surprising red flowers resembling their common name, parrot's beak.

Pennywort
Another plant that has made the transition from groundcover to containers is pennywort, Lysimachia nummularia. The golden variety makes an especially attractive draping accent plant. It will tolerate full sun but really prefers some shade.

Red Pennisetum
Gaining in popularity each year, this purple-red ornamental grass also known as red (or purple) fountain grass makes a graceful statement all summer. Hardy only to Zone 8 or 9, this plant is grown here just for its summer beauty. Generally it is shipped to us from California in its full plumage. Plant in the ground or containers. The more sun it gets, the better color the foliage will have.

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Sweet Potato Vines
Another incredible new development in the plant world, these decorative cousins to your Thanksgiving dish are grown for their draping or sprawling habit and leaf color. Blackie has dark, almost black foliage, Marguerite has chartreuse leaves and Tricolor (the slowest grower of the three) is variegated with green, pink and white. Grow in high light to full sun and give them room to run or drape.

Vinca Vine
An old standard, variegated vinca vine is valued for its cascading habit and creamy white over green variegation. Vinca vine is very drought tolerant and loves the sun, but will take a little shade and now includes a yellow and green variety.

Less Common But Worth Looking For:

Alternanthera versicolor
This plant is valued for its blood red to maroon spoon-shaped leaves. The plant grows 12-24" tall and is fairly loose and open, making it good for interplanting. It has its best color in full sun and will be much less intense in the shade. Good in large containers to offer contrast to the other plants.

Iresine aka Chicken Gizzard
The purple-red version of this old-fashioned house plant makes an incredible foil for plants with blue or pink flowers. Try planting it near blue heliotrope and pink geraniums! Iresine has distinctive gizzard shaped leaves on a upright plant. Pinch occasionally to keep the plant compact. Plant in bright light for the best color. Take in a few pinches for the winter windowsill.

Orach
Grown readily from seed, there are two versions of orach available that are attractive in the garden. One variety has blood red leaves and the other has yellow leaves. Both are also grown as an Asian vegetable similar to spinach. The plant is very upright, often growing 2-3’ tall even in our short season. Plant in full sun.

Purple Perilla aka Beefsteak Plant
Another dual purpose plant prized both for its attractive foliage and as an Asian herb called shiso, some varieties have dark red-purple foliage. The variety Crispa has frilly edges to the leaf.

Persian Shield
Botanically Strobilanthes, Persian shield offers bold, slightly iridescent purple leaves highlighted with pink when they get enough sun. The leaves are large and the plant can get fairly tall, so it is best used either in the ground or in large containers. The more sun it receives, the more intense the coloring.
Variegated Creeping Charlie
Yes, creeping Charlie! A cousin to the pernicious weed in our yards, this plant has beautiful green and white variegated leaves and looks great in containers. Full to light shade.

Variegated Peppers "There are quite a few pepper plants with variegated or purple foliage that make attractive ornamentals, especially once they are also adorned by the bright fruits. Full sun for good fruit production and color. Heights vary from miniature plants that are only 8" to 3’ tall.

Variegated Herbs
A few herbs such as some of the mints, thyme, sage and oregano offer attractive variegated foliage in a variety of shapes, sizes and habits. As with almost all herbs, the more sun the better. Heights vary.

At McShane’s Nursery and Landscape Supply, we want to help you find the exact plants you want for your landscape. Ask a professional if you are looking for a specific type or if you are just searching for a suggestion. They are always happy to make your landscaping experience easy and enjoyable.