



Black Magic

Aeonium arboreum
'Zwartkop' is a
succulent whose
black leaves make
it a dramatic addi-
tion to a container.

Plants with black or purple leaves
add depth to designs

by CALEB MELCHIOR



Drawings need shadows, music needs bass notes. Similarly, gardens need dark leaves. I'm never one to shy away from a bright plant—or a dozen—but I've found that dark foliage adds a depth and definition to planting schemes that you just won't get with anything else. This is particularly true in containers, where every element must be as color saturated as possible. Lately I'm choosing annuals, tropicals and tender perennials that exhaust my store of adjectives: plum, chocolate, ebony, burgundy, sable, mulberry. Here are a few of the darkest and most desirable.

TRUE BLACK

For those of us in temperate climates, elephant ears, or taros (*Colocasia*), bear the largest leaves we can hope to grow, with many growing foot-long leaves in one season. (They must be treated as annuals or wintered over under protection in most zones.) Among dark varieties, *Colocasia esculenta* 'Black Magic' is an old favorite. Its supremacy is now challenged by *C. e.* 'Diamond Head', a recent introduction from Dr. John Cho of the University of Hawaii. Small plugs we planted in our Wet Garden last May soared to six feet by the end of July. Their immense glossy leaves brought daily comment from visitors to the nursery. I've heard similar reports from across the country. Give 'Diamond Head' abundant moisture and warmth for best results.

Dan Benarcik, a horticulturist at Chanticleer Gardens in Pennsylvania, chooses *C. e.* 'Illusttris' as one of his favorite dark plants. "People overlook 'Illusttris,'" Benarcik says, but he admires its ashen, almost gray overtones, which "resemble crushed velvet on unfurling." It tolerates shade, as do dark-leaved varieties of colocasias' cousins, the alocasias. *Alocasia infernalis* 'Kapit' is a favorite of Jimmy Turner, senior director of gardens at the Dallas Arboretum. "The leaves reflect no light at all, giving them a velvety finish—like eggshell," he says. Turner also likes *A. plumbea* 'Jurassic Dark', a shiny black variety for shade. These dark alocasias reach two or three feet in one season. Keep them warm, Turner warns—anything below 50°F will stunt their growth, if not kill them completely.

If you're looking for attractive flowers and leaves, try *Canna* 'Australia' (Zones 7b–10). It has narrow near-black leaves and scarlet flowers. Tony Avent of Plant Delights Nursery in Raleigh, North Carolina, calls it "the gold standard" of dark cannas. "Tropicanna Black' (Zones 7b–10) is another dark variety, but with orange flowers.

Have you seen *Gossypium herbaceum* 'Nigra', the black-leaved cotton? Its matte leaves, magenta miniature-hibiscus flowers and puffy white bolls in late summer led Dan Benarcik to describe this annual as "absolutely dazzling." Landcraft Environments is one of the few commercial sources of this desirable plant. Co-owner Dennis Shraeder admires its flowers and foliage. What does he consider its best attribute? "It actually bears real cotton."

Top to bottom: *Oxalis regnellii* packs a double punch of purple with its two-tone leaves. *Tradescantia pallida* 'Purple Heart' does too, with plum leaves and pinkish purple flowers. *Oxalis purpurea* 'Garnet' also has bright flowers crowning its purple foliage. Opposite page: 'Dark Star' coleus offers textural purple leaves and compact growth.



Imagine a berberis in black, with leaves darker and glossier than anything you've ever seen, and you have *Coprosma* 'Cutie' (Zones 8–11). Benarcik has good success with this tidy New Zealand native. Its black leaves are "so glossy that they make even 'Diamond Head' (colocasia) look dull." It's another one worth searching for.

If you haven't yet grown the ornamental pepper 'Black Pearl' (*Capsicum annuum* 'Black Pearl'), drop what you're doing and get to your closest garden center immediately. Fine black leaves with a soft sheen, tiny lavender flowers and shiny purple berries that turn scarlet as they age make 'Black Pearl' an absolute favorite. "I use it in every part of the garden," Turner says. Give it full sun for best color.

Succulents have long been popular on the West Coast. Today, gardeners across the continent are discovering the value of these easy-care plants. *Aeonium arborescens* 'Zwartkop' (syn. 'Schwarzkopf') brings a shadow to the most blazing part of your garden. Its glossy black rosettes appeal throughout the year; bring it indoors for the winter and enjoy it on the windowsill if you live north of Zone 9. *Echeveria* 'Black Prince' is another dark gem. Its pointed leaves are dusty black with a hint of green. They have a soft sheen, not the extreme gloss of the aeonium. Combine it with other echeverias, such as gleaming sea-green 'Topsy Turvy' and lilac-rose 'Metallica', to create a bowl of jewels that will shimmer in the low light of sunrise or sunset.

DARK PURPLE

Need to make a dramatic statement? Plant a big dark grass. Rita Randolph of Randolph's Greenhouses in Jackson, Tennessee, is fond of Allan Armitage's Princess series of *Pennisetum purpureum* (Zones 8–11), especially the compact new varieties 'Princess Caroline' and 'Princess Molly'. Older varieties *P. p.* 'Prince' and *P. p.* 'Princess' have found favor throughout the Southeast. 'Prince' grows five to six feet tall with bronze leaves. 'Princess' is smaller, to four feet, and a deeper purple. I grew 'Princess' in my Exotic Garden last summer. Its strong purple spears contrasted nicely with *Hibiscus tiliaceus* 'Variegata'—another desirable tropical, whose heart-shaped leaves are flecked crimson and purple on opening, but fade to cream and green as they age.

Euphorbia cotinifolia (Zones 9–11) makes a great dark-leaved specimen for large pots. This four-foot mass of burgundy leaves glows when backlit. Try it with a trail of golden poet's jasmine (*Jasminum officinale* 'Frojas')



and a cloud of *Euphorbia* 'Diamond Frost'. *Hibiscus acetosella* is another four-foot burgundy treasure for sunny spots. Its flowers are insignificant, but the maple-shaped leaves make a pretty background for lime coleus or cream dahlias.


Coleus (*Solenostemon* cultivars) are essential in any discussion of colorful leaves. Nothing rivals their range of colors and textures. Benarcik likes 'Dark Star' because of its restrained growth. Turner's choices are 'Blackberry Waffles' and 'Dark Heart' because their colors stay clean and they don't scorch in full sun.

Three old favorites complete the purple palette. Purple forms of *Alternanthera dentata* (Zones 10–11), such as 'Rubiginosa' and 'Purple Knight', quickly form spreading masses of bright plum foliage. 'Gail's Choice', claimed to be of hybrid origin, is also suitable for filling empty spots in full sun or part shade.

Nothing's easier to grow than purple heart vine, *Tradescantia pallida* (Zones 10–11). I've seen plants growing from broken stems that fell beneath nursery benches. While its vigor might be dangerous in areas with mild winters, this fleshy purple trailer is immensely useful for summer plantings in colder climates. I use it to fill the

holes in our Woodland Garden when ephemerals have disappeared for the summer. 'Purple Giant' and 'Biltmore Bimbo' are clones selected for larger leaves and a bolder texture.

For a smaller splash of purple, try one of the purple-leaved forms of *Oxalis regnellii* (Zones 6–10). 'Purpurea' is the standard. Its purple clover-like leaflets have darker margins. Several solid purple forms are widely available. Randolph grows 'Myca', which bears small pink flowers in addition to the colorful leaves. Also look for burgundy *O. vulcanicola* 'Zinfandel' (Zones 6–10), with dark red leaves and yellow flowers. All will prosper with little attention and make good supporting elements in container combinations.

Whether almost black or just a deep shade of purple, dark-leaved plants have the potential to transform your planting schemes. Invite these shadowy beauties into your garden and you'll find that they strengthen the effect of all their companions. 

During the summer, **CALEB MELCHIOR** sells his favorite dark plants at Sugar Creek Gardens in Kirkwood, Missouri, and tries new varieties at home in his exotic garden.