



PHOTOS BY NEIL HODGES

## COLOR Schemes

*Letting your garden be your canvas*

For many gardeners, color is the end-all and be-all in the garden. And color is indeed to be desired. Many will also say that in a garden all colors go together, so plant whatever looks good at the market and let 'em all fight it out and the result will be a colorful garden. Maybe so. But you can do better than that. Harmony is one quality which elevates a garden above a mere collection of plants. A harmonious blending of colors and color schemes is much more pleasing than the chaotic and careless effect of "anything goes." And the planning of this blending is at least half the fun.

White is, of course, the great harmonizer. White flowers, not only beautiful in themselves and particularly lovely at dusk, serve to sharpen and heighten other colors by contrast. And don't ignore contrast as an important element, because it enables you to "see" the garden better and to appreciate the colors and forms as they meld together.

Another color quality observable in the garden is that light or pastel colors tend to visually recede, thus expanding the sense of space or distance, whereas bright hues pop out and appear closer. Also, pale blue is a difficult color to use for visual effect because of insufficient contrast between flower and foliage color intensity, causing blue to fade or become insignificant from a distance.

Exceptions to the above caution include caladiums, where different varieties really do co-exist harmoniously because each variety carries in it a shade or tone of the next type – so one flows seamlessly into its neighbor. It is next to impossible to go wrong when blending caladiums. And what a splendid shade plant, very adapted to the Lowcountry. However do not plant tubers until the ground warms up to 60 degrees at six inches depth. As I do not own a soil thermometer, I usually just stick my finger in the ground and estimate. Better yet, wait until late in the spring when you can be more confident of a welcome from Mother Earth.

Another exception is coleus in its myriad combinations of red, maroon, pink, gold, green and many mottled and striped variations of the above. They are friendly to each other (within obvious visual limits), and a few different color combinations, say two or three planted together

in a rhythmic pattern, provide a bold but still harmonious effect. It is fun to express your creative color sense in combining these vibrant plants.

Other than the standard colorful Lowcountry annuals familiar to everyone, new sources of garden color have recently proved themselves winners in the pots and garden space I tend. My first experience with abutilon has been amazingly successful considering that I had never seen it five years ago. It just blooms and blooms, no matter what I do or don't do or what eccentric weather befalls. As soon as current bloom fades, the next crop starts afresh with large, rosy, tissue-paper-like blooms, almost as if it had been secretly preparing a fresh face as the old is slipping away. The extravagant color schemes run from pink to jewel tones of salmon, peach, apricot, pale orange tipped with yellow, and crimson. They are visually better in pots or hanging baskets because the flowers tend to nod like so many bells and admiring them below emphasizes their beauty.

Another newcomer on the color scene was given to me at Sarah Duke Gardens, but a similar example shows up in regular catalogues. It is a geranium (pelargonium), and its magic color appears in the leaves. Though there is a warm weather display of small salmon flowers, the leaf color goes on, winter and summer, cold and hot, and it is charming. The scalloped or round leaves are combinations of pale green, salmon, yellow, maroon or red and they are unchanging in their delicate beauty throughout the year. It is probably best as a potted plant as it is small in stature, but large in satisfaction.

Last is the glamour girl, clivia, a gift from a generous gardener. It blooms in late winter, its flower a large globe of many brilliant deep orange to yellow-tinted florets. A tough plant despite its dazzling appearance, it likes cool night temperatures and dry culture to bring it to bloom. A catalogue calls it nearly indestructible as a container plant, one which can be placed on patio or deck after threat of frost is past. And what a cheerful, uplifting sight at the end of winter when we are aching for bright bloom.

These are a few of my favorite things, color-wise and otherwise.  
– Barbara Hodges