Little-Used Perennials for the Garden Designer

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More unusual plants for the adventurous gardener.

As a garden designer, I find that my reputation depends on applying unusual plants in unexpected applications. I also attempt to achieve planting compositions that look finished from the start but will age well, as some plants—chosen for a short-lived role—get squeezed out by the growth and maturation of neighboring plants. Herbaceous perennials, which are essential at the start in order to achieve the look of a “finished” landscape, will soften and age gracefully, eventually allowing the woody materials to take over.

Learning about and applying new plants becomes part of the satisfaction of garden making, for isn’t it more challenging to try new combinations than to repeat standard gardening formulas? While I do learn and draw from the work of others, I am constantly trying to acquaint myself with new plants and to envision creative design solutions that include them. I’d like to share some of my recent plant discoveries, which I am still getting to know at this point. I will feel more comfortable using them once I gain greater familiarity and experience with their habits. I would like to hear from readers with any additional observations about these plants, based on their own site and environmental conditions, as well as their talent for gardening. Unless otherwise noted, all the perennials mentioned are hardy and can be grown successfully in the Boston area.

Adonis amurensis

This plant, known as pheasant's-eye, is an early ephemeral that comes and goes so quickly that it is apt to be forgotten until its surprise return the next season. At the first warmth of spring, it is especially cheerful to see small golden flowers perched atop bright green ferny foliage. In New England the flowers last two weeks or slightly longer, and are significant for their abundance and earliness. Barry Yinger, Supervisor of Horticulture
at the Buck Garden in Far Hills, New Jersey, tells me that he has collected six cultivars and they are thriving at his Pennsylvania garden. The earliest in bloom was 'Beni Nadeshike', which began flowering on January 13, while the other cultivars extended the bloom season into early May.

One of life's great treats is to take a stroll along the March Walk at Winterthur Gardens in Delaware and see sheets of *Adonis amurensis* 'Fukujakai', mixed with *Galanthus*, scattered across the woodland floor. According to Yinger, 'Fukujakai', with a single golden-yellow blossom, is the most commonly grown clone in the United States. 'Beni Nadeshike', with a single orange flower, is the most common of the non-yellow clones in Japan. He also described clones with flowers that are near-white, pale to dark yellow, and pale to dark orange, as well as flowers that are semi- or fully double.

While presently not common in gardens, the reason certainly is not that *Adonis* lacks toughness, for once established it is durable and long-lived. I blame its scarcity on gardeners' lack of familiarity with the plant, the difficulty of propagation (the seeds are either rare or short-lived), and a flowering time that occurs before most people have focused on the spring planting season. *Adonis* thrives in deep, moist, well-drained acid soil in a location where it has full sun at the time of flowering and light shade after flowering. This shade protection can be achieved by planting it near deciduous trees or shrubs. People who have access to this plant will find that it can
be easily increased by division just after flowering.

**Angelica gigas**

During the summer of 1990, I first discovered *Angelica gigas*, a Korean native, displayed in the gardens of some of the finest plantspeople in Massachusetts, New York, and Vermont. All these plants could be traced back to an introduction made by plant collector Barry Yinger. *Angelica gigas* is a statuesque plant with large, textured, boldly incised foliage borne on a stout, straight central stem. In New England, flowering occurs in July and August. Prior to opening, the flower buds are enclosed in a lime-green tunic and presented on axillary stems with a charming crook in their "necks." Blossoms look like maroon heads of cauliflower and unfurl over the course of several weeks. The flowers are presented in a fashion that displays them handsomely, and, in my opinion, majestically. The color provides a nice echo displayed with maroon foliage plants, such as *Berberis thunbergii var. atropurpurea* 'Rose Glow', *Cotinus coggygria* 'Royal Purple', and *Sedum maximum* 'Atropurpureum'. Plants like some protection from the hottest sun and thrive in lightly dappled shade. In my own garden I lost plants to some kind of, as yet undetermined, browsing animal. With optimum environmental conditions, seeds are abundant, and therefore this *Angelica* should quickly move into the trade.

**Arum italicum**

An unusual growing cycle characterizes *Arum italicum*: the foliage emerges in early autumn, remains green throughout the winter, and dies away in early summer. In spring, greenish-white, calla lily-like flowers appear, followed in the summer by a stalk of berries that ripen to a shiny bright red and are quite showy in the autumn garden. What attracts my attention is the handsome white markings on the leaves, markings that are quite variable between individual plants. Although selections have been made (I have observed beautiful variants at Pamela Harper's garden in Virginia), I am not aware that they are yet commercially available in North America.

Since the plant is grown from a corm, it should be possible to achieve quick stock increase. While still uncommon in the gardens of New England because of hardiness limitations, it has been successful in many southern gardens where it has naturalized freely. It should thrive in Cape Cod and on Nantucket where the climate is more moderate than in the Boston area.

**Bletilla striata**

This terrestrial orchid, native to Japan and China, thrives in locations as diverse as Nantucket and Kansas City, as well as many locations in the Pacific Northwest. On Nantucket,
where I have observed it most frequently, it forms a dense clump of broad, lance-shaped leaves that, at the edges of the colony, arch outward. Plants prefer locations with cool summers, growing in open sandy soil with good drainage and in full sun to light shade. Mature plants stand 30 to 60 centimeters tall (1 to 2 feet), bearing medium-green leaves that appear gently pleated. The foliage tends to be very architectural in design, and I consider it elegant solely as a foliage plant. Multiple plants look attractive as a ribbon flowing through a ground cover of contrasting texture, such as prostrate junipers or Asarum europaeum. In northern areas Bletilla can be grown in pots set out in the summer and overwintered in a cold frame or other sheltered sites.

Flowering occurs in mid-June and, depending on the type, can be a rich purple or a pure white. Just beginning to make its way around in gardens is a variegated clone on which each leaf is bordered by a white pinstripe and whose flowers are a rich purple color. An entirely different variegation is represented in a plant with yellow stripes on its leaves; the stripes are most evident in spring but gradually fade, becoming less distinctive by mid-season. The green-leaved, purple-flowered form of Bletilla has been available in the United States for some time, but has remained largely ignored by the gardening public. As I surveyed nursery catalogues, I was amazed at how many mail order nurseries list this plant for the 1992 growing season. Perhaps Bletilla will not remain unknown for long.

**Calamintha nepeta subsp. nepeta**

Lesser calamint is a perennial native of Europe that has naturalized itself in several of the mid-Atlantic states. Growing 30 to 60 centimeters tall (1 to 2 feet), it blooms from mid-summer until frost and provides the effect of a long-flowering baby's-breath. In full flower, it tends to be thin in density and wispy in appearance, with small, mint-like blossoms occurring in clusters. During mid-summer blossoms are pale white, but with the onset of autumn, they assume tints of pale lilac. The flowering stalks tend to be a bit lax and arch across neighboring plants. Garden designers will find this habit a desirable characteristic as a filler and weave—to soften the distinction between individual plants.

**Carex stricta 'Bowles Golden'**

This sedge is normally a plant of moist soils, thriving on lake and stream banks in full sun or light shade and forming a small haystack-like mound with golden-yellow leaves. Flowering is insignificant, but the plant does produce thin, wiry flowering stems that move and produce animation in the landscape. 'Bowles Golden' grass is visually effective because of the wispy habit of the plant and the distinctive foliage color of golden-yellow to chartreuse-green that is dependable in its presentation all summer long. These features can be combined with other herbaceous perennials to create pleasing compositions in the garden.

**Cassia hebecarpa**

A native American plant that in nature inhabits moist stream banks and open woodlands, Cassia hebecarpa in cultivation thrives in full sun and poor soil. Plants grow 1 to 2 meters tall (3 to 6 feet) and bear attractive, pinately compound foliage topped by golden-yellow blossoms from mid- to late summer. Since its growth habit is tall and bushy, it functions almost like a small shrub. It can be used in the landscape as a summer barrier, but it dies back to soil level in the autumn, exposing a much simplified landscape scene. After flowering, it seeds abundantly and produces a surplus of new plants for the next season.

**Corydalis lutea**

The delicately cut, light-green foliage of Corydalis lutea reminds one of ferns or Dicentra eximia. The plant bears charming, tiny golden blossoms all summer long, making it one of the longest-flowering perennials. Many years ago, I visited Lincoln and Timmy Foster,
supremely skilled rock gardeners in northwestern Connecticut. Their front entry included a large stone wall engulfed with Corydalis that conveyed a sense of exuberance. Once established, Corydalis lutea has the appealing tendency of making itself at home and seeding itself about the garden in nooks and crannies. Some might call this behavior weedy, but it allows nature to participate in loosening up the garden and providing change, as plants appear in unexpected locations. Like bleeding heart, the stems of this plant are fragile and easily broken by errant feet or careless garden maintenance. One note of caution: on several occasions I have purchased Corydalis lutea at a garden center only to end up with Corydalis ochroleuca, which has a pale, cream-colored flower and is probably less aggressive as a spreader. For many it may be a preferred choice, but I like the "weediness" of Corydalis lutea.

Disporum flavum
Richard Weaver, of We-Du Nursery, first introduced me to this elegant woodland plant more than ten years ago, and after learning of its merits, I marvel that it isn't grown more widely. Korean fairy-bells form a multiple-stemmed clump growing 80 to 100 centimeters tall (2.5 to 3 feet) and stand erect in a statuesque fashion. Stems, rather open at the base, are topped by foliage that remains attractive all summer long. Appearing in May, the flowers are nodding, roughly bell-shaped, and golden-yellow. Plants thrive in light shade.
and, when grown in moist, organically rich soil, increase rapidly, but not invasively. Richard Weaver tells me that in North Carolina this plant sometimes emerges so early in the spring that it gets cut back by late frosts. He hastened to add that he never experienced this problem when growing Disporum in Boston. In my garden, Disporum flavum is tough and durable, but cannot endure the intensity of full sun.

**Filipendula camtschatica**
Large, dramatic plants are useful for the back of the border and for creating effects of enclosure and division in cultivated settings. In wet meadows, bold plants also offer a size and scale appropriate to vast outdoor spaces. One giant perennial that offers exciting opportunities for creating spatial modulation in the garden is Filipendula camtschatica. I have seen it growing beautifully in a garden in northern Maine situated in front of a tall walled enclosure. The plants stand nearly 3 meters tall (10 feet), and the blossoms appear as huge billowy puffs of creamy white. In Maine, full bloom occurs from the end of July till early August.

**Hosta montana ‘Aureo-marginata’**
I find this hosta especially useful in creating visual compositions in the shaded landscape. The plant has an upright, vase-shaped form, and each leaf has a bold margin of golden-yellow. A dramatic composition can be achieved by underplanting with the ornamental grass Hakenerocha macra ‘Aureola’, which forms a ground cover of fine leaves to mimic the color and tone of the hosta foliage while allowing a change of height and texture. For a planting at Harvard University, I used these two plants in combination with Berberis thunbergii ‘Aurea’ to create a composition of golden foliage that remained visually showy all summer long. This planting, beneath huge old elm and oak trees, is growing in moderate shade. I find it most attractive on cloudy, gloomy days when it resembles a shaft of sunlight brightening the landscape. It also is at its best at the approach of twilight when its golden colors appear as visual highlights.

**Humulus lupulus ‘Aureus’**
Commonly seen in English gardens, the golden hop vine is just beginning to make its way here, distinctive for its medium-sized, pale golden-yellow, lobed leaves. This color persists from the time leaves emerge until early summer, when the yellow foliage turns to green for the rest of the summer. When I was given the plant, the donor warned me that, once established, it could grow 9 to 12 meters (30 to 40 feet) each season. After two years, my plant, which I grow on pea netting, has almost exceeded this potential. Each autumn after the plant has died to soil level, I cut it back to the ground and remove and replace the netting. The hop vine is exceptionally hardy, and I have seen it growing luxuriously in Banff, Canada, where winters are often long and severe.

**Lysichiton americanum**
Planting and managing wetland areas are still poorly understood and rarely done well by gardeners. I am, therefore, always delighted to
find the yellow skunk cabbage thriving in wetland gardens in New England. One might assume that *Lysichiton americanum*, a native of the West Coast from California to Alaska, would not be particularly successful in New England, yet it thrives at the Garden in the Woods in Framingham, Massachusetts. The foliage is boldly elegant, especially effective in spring and early summer, if somewhat tattered by late summer after slugs have feasted on the leafy tissue. Individual leaves are elliptic in shape, 30 to 100 centimeters long (1 to 3 feet), light green, of a thick and fleshy substance, and grow clustered, rising from a crown. Frances Clark, at the Garden in the Woods, tells me that she has seen it in Alaska where it grows along streams beneath thickets of willows. She remarked on how odd the combination looked with the bold foliage of the *Lysichiton* among the tangle of the willows. The distinctive foliage of the *Lysichiton* worked well, she added, when planted along pathways where it was visually tied to the landscape.

**Milium effusum 'Aureum'**
The golden wood millet, a grass that grows 45 to 60 centimeters tall (18 to 24 inches), does best in light shade, in which case its foliage remains a lime green all summer long. Of delicate, textured, upright habit, it can be used as a specimen to provide spots of chartreuse in shade. In my own garden, however, I have used it as a small hedge or border combined with *Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola', as they both have similar textures but different growth habits. When sited in particularly appropriate locations, the *Milium* will seed itself and wander about the garden. I particularly like it mixed with *Corydalis lutea* as a color echo, both naturalize themselves in unexpected spots and form changing color schemes in the garden. The foliage of this grass emerges early in spring and looks especially attractive when combined with the blue flowers of *Chionodoxa*.

**Osmunda claytoniana**
*Elegant* and *statuesque* best describe this beautiful native fern. The form of the plant is an upright vase shape, and the foliage is a pale green. The common name of this plant, interrupted fern, refers to the fact that the middle portion of the fronds are occupied by fertile spore-bearing structures of a dark cinnamon brown that attractively divide the leaf. More drought-tolerant than most ferns, *Osmunda claytoniana* mixes handsomely among evergreen ground covers such as *Hedera helix*, *Vinca minor*, and *Juniperus horizontalis*. In Maine landscapes, this plant is often found growing through masses of *Pachysandra terminalis*. Interrupted fern can be used around the base of houses as a substitute for small shrubs. The advantage is that it never overwhelms the structure by growing...
excessively tall; the disadvantage is that it dies to the ground in fall, leaving the base of the house exposed.

**Plantago major 'Atropurpurea'**

A noteworthy colony of this purple-leafed plantain grows along the edge of a brook in the Van Dusen Botanical Garden in Vancouver, British Columbia. While the leaf shape is similar to the common turf grass weed, the foliage of this type tends to be somewhat larger and of a rich maroon color. At Van Dusen, combined with other plants of silver foliage and white flowers, it made a beautiful visual composition. Plants in my Massachusetts garden seem a duller and less intense purple than those I remember in Vancouver, but they are still attractive to me. This is an abundant seeder of easy germination.

**Podophyllum hexandrum**

Our native mayapple, *Podophyllum peltatum*, forms great spreading colonies beneath the trees and shrubs of Eastern woodlands. While the spring foliage is quite beautiful, it tends to go dormant in early summer. As an alternative, I admire an Asian species, *P. hexandrum*, with several desirable characteristics. The new season's leaves emerge in May and for several days resemble small umbrellas as they rise up and unfurl. While the leaves remain still somewhat gathered together, the flower bud sits perched atop the leaf and opens wide to reveal a white flower with maroon stamens. The flower is followed by a roundish fruit about the size of a plum, which ripens to a beautiful reddish-orange color. The leaves, a light green with pale maroon markings, persist throughout the summer, becoming unattractive only in the fall or when suffering from drought. The plant forms dense clumps and is more easily contained in the garden than the native species. *Podophyllum hexandrum* looks beautiful interplanted with *Hedera helix*, for the light-green, young-season foliage of the mayapple makes a stunning visual contrast against the dark green of the ivy.

**Ranunculus ficaria**

Many of you may view this plant as a weed that needs to be eradicated from the landscape. Others will see it as a charming and colorful interloper that spreads freely in moist meadows brightening the late April landscape. I find it interesting in that, once established, tubers will be moved about in the process of lawn mowing and garden cultivation so that it will eventually spread over much larger areas than originally planted. At the Arnold Arboretum, lesser celandine inhabits moist areas adjacent to Goldsmith Brook and mixes with *Scilla bifolia* and *Scilla sibirica* in great masses of yellow and blue, which drift discreetly, and ephemerally, across the landscape. While many know the typical golden-yellow form, few gardeners are aware of several wonderful color forms, ranging from whitish to
buff to bright orange. Tubers can be obtained from Potterton and Martin, a specialty bulb company in England.

**Rohdea japonica**

Broad, fleshy, strap-shaped leaves characterize *Rohdea japonica*, the Nippon lily. Individual specimens grow from a crown sending up the bold evergreen leaves that are either solid green or beautifully variegated. *Rohdea* is highly prized by collectors in Japan, who, according to Barry Yinger, have made over 700 named selections based on leaf color, size, fruit color, and overall growth form. Two of the most common garden forms are 'Taishokan', which has been long cultivated in Japan to produce foliage for the florist industry, and 'Miyako No Jo', which is a strong-growing, green-leaved type.

Richard Lighty of Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, has established a large colony resembling a ground-cover planting, with all the plants grown from the same individual by division. Although established for many years, the colony has yet to fruit (fruits occur in cone-like clusters and ripen to a bright red color). The Arnold Arboretum has supplied Lighty with several seedlings with a different genetic base, in the hope of cross pollinating with his stock to achieve seed production.

The American literature suggests that *Rohdea japonica* is hardy only as far north as Washington, D. C., but it has proven to be cold-hardy in the Boston area. It does not die
back in the wintertime, and flowers and fruits freely. Yinger suggests that the plant is probably only reliably hardy to USDA Zone 7, and that it needs careful microclimate selection in colder areas. The plant thrives in well-drained, acid soil. In my experience, the plant grows slowly, needs little care, and is exceptionally drought tolerant.

Perhaps the greatest potential for our gardens comes from the as yet unavailable fancy-leafed forms, which will require performance evaluation under our growing conditions. The variegated-leaf forms can be used as stripes, ribbons, clusters, or colonies interplanted with *Vinca minor*; and the green-leafed forms can be beautifully set among a bed of *Asarum europaeum*.

**Smilacina racemosa**

False Solomon's-seal is a native woodland plant that deserves to play a greater role in garden making. It forms clumps of upright stems with many longitudinally parallel-veined leaves of a lovely light-green color. Tiny creamy-white blossoms appear in great feathery terminal clusters, the weight of the inflorescence causing the stems to arch over. And during late summer, clusters of pea-sized fruits ripen, ranging in color from purplish to orange-red. While *Smilacina racemosa* is widespread across North America, I am unaware of horticultural selections, though I have heard of a variegated form available in England. It seems reasonable that selections could be made for form, larger inflorescences, and enhanced fruiting characteristics.

**Stipa gigantea**

*Dramatically veiled* and *filmy* best describe the flowering effect of the giant feather grass. This grass forms a dense clump of foliage that stands about 60 centimeters tall (2 feet). During May, thin, erect stalks of flowers rise a meter (3 feet) or more above the foliage. These delicate stalks draw the observer's eye through to distant views, as they divide space, create a foreground, and bring animation to the garden when each stirring of the breeze sets the stems swaying.

**Ibvara virginiana 'Variegata'**

This cultivar competes for attention with *Ibvara virginiana var. filimormis 'Painter's Palette'. Each has a green leaf splashed with creamy yellow, but in 'Painter's Palette', markings of chocolate and pink are added. I prefer 'Variegata' as I have found it to be a stronger and more dependable grower. In addition, I prefer the appearance of the creamy variegation by itself—without the intrusion of the browns and pinks. I have seen plants used in Kansas City, Missouri, as bold clumps in full sun where they functioned as small shrubs. Personal preferences aside, both types are useful for they allow designers different coloring opportunities. The plant seeds abundantly, and seedlings sprout freely, creating white spots against the dark brown earth.

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