



UConn
COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE,
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ARCHITECTURE

UConn Home and Garden Education
Center
U-4115, 1380 Storrs Road
Storrs, CT 06269-4115
877-486-6271

www.ladybug.uconn.edu
uconnladybug.wordpress.com

Strike it Rich with Metallic Hued Plant Selections

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

When one thinks of leaves, usually the color green comes to mind. However, a quick trip to a local garden center or even perusing online sources, will quickly enlighten any gardener to the vast array of fantastic foliage plants out there. Depending on one's tastes and desired garden use, choices range from frosty silvers to bronzy caramels to gold hued selections.

Plants with dramatic and distinctive foliage can be used to dress up perennial beds during the often drab, midsummer lull after the spring and early summer blooming species have concluded their show but before the late summer through fall encore begins. They can also have a dramatic impact in containers and, are often well placed in shade gardens where their shimmering foliage lightens up that dark corner. Some serve quite nicely as groundcovers where little else will grow.



Many plants with enticing leaves are perfectly hardy here and quite undemanding. A tough favorite of many is the Siberian bugloss (*Brunnera macrophylla*) 'Jack Frost'. This plant (see image on left) belongs to the borage family so as you might expect it has small, lovely, sky-blue flowers in the spring. The contrast is just heavenly with the green-edged silver leaves interspersed with green veins.

Plant Siberian bugloss is deep, moist soil preferably in part shade. Plants reach about 18 inches tall. 'Variegata' has green leaves, edged in white and 'Looking Glass' has mostly silver-colored leaves that cup downward. For more sunny spots, 'Diane's Gold' is a sure winner with its petite 12-inch size, blue flowers and bright lime-green foliage.

For dry, shady areas, a go-to groundcover that is attractive but does not want to take over the world is spotted dead nettle (*Lamium maculatum*). 'Beacon Silver' is an old standby reaching about 6 to 8 inches and sporting bright pink blossoms most heavily in spring but off and on throughout the summer if kept moist. The leaves are dark green with a silver white splotch.

'White Nancy' also has the silver splotched leaves but with white flowers. She seems to require greater amounts of moisture, at least in my gardens. 'Orchid Frost' is supposedly a more vigorous spotted dead nettle and also, more resistant to the foliar diseases that this species often gets. The flowers are orchid pink and the leaves are bluish-green with a silver mid-vein.

For hot, sunny areas, there are a number of silver leaved plants that will thrive. Among them is one Artemisia that does not spread with abandon and that is the silver southernwood (*Artemisia abrotanum*). It behaves more like a shrub, reaching about 2 feet high and wide. Aside from it being drought tolerant and not appealing to deer, the soft silvery foliage just begs to be touched and upon doing so, one breathes in a soft woody, citrusy scent. This plant lasted for almost 15 years in my herb garden before a particularly wet winter did it in.

A plant I have had around even longer than that is the Japanese painted fern (*Athyrium niponicum*), image on right. This magnificent creature has fronds extending to about 18 inches that are a greyish green with silvery overlays and dark maroon midribs. I find new baby ferns every so often and just move them nearer their parents to create my own version of *metallica* in my white garden. Japanese painted ferns spread very slowly by rhizomes. They prefer part to full shade but tolerate wet areas. Check out 'Ghost' with its more silvery-colored fronds and 'Burgundy Lace' awash in silver, bronze and purple. In general, fronds become more greenish towards the end of the growing season.



The explosion of foliage colors in *Heuchera* species (coral bells) is absolutely amazing. On top of their exuberant foliage, coral bells are tough plants and well-suited to both containers and perennial beds. Plants are hardy from zone 4 to 9, they grow well in sun or part shade and their tiny, bell-shaped flowers, borne on open panicles, are oh-so-attractive to hummingbirds. Plants are semi-evergreen depending on species and their location in the garden, at least in my yard.

An old favorite is 'Palace Purple', a deep purple to burgundy, large-leaved plant that fades to an almost glowing bronze as summer progresses and temperatures rise. The leaves may reach 5 inches or so in diameter but plants are only a foot high and tall. Like the Japanese painted fern, I occasionally find young plants and replant them where their color is needed.

'Caramel' is another choice selection with what I consider bronzy-gold leaves and a petite growing habit with plants less than 1 foot tall and wide. New growth is an exciting bright gold color.

'Green Spice' coral bells is also fairly petite and has small, white flowers but exquisite silvery leaves punctuated by bright purple veins. 'Geisha's Fan', on the other hand produces purplish leaves with charcoal veins. Leaves are then dusted with silver, and the flowers are pink. These are but a handful of choices in the ever-growing compendium of coral bell hybrids.

All too often gardeners, let flowers dictate their purchases and plantings. Perhaps some of these fabulous foliage plants have piqued your curiosity and aroused your creative senses. Do consider adding some of these intriguing and exciting plants to your home landscapes.

For information on growing any of these foliage plants or on other home and gardening topics, call the UConn Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free, at (877) 486-6271, check out our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.