Designing for Visual Texture

Contrasting the patterns, shapes, and sizes of leaves is a key to making successful combinations

by Tracy DiSabato-Aust

In a well-designed border, we often notice the beauty of the combinations of plants more than the individual plants themselves. To achieve this sense of interplay, it's useful to think about visual texture: the patterns created by the lines and forms of combined leaves, branches, and flowers. Instead of using threads or yarns to weave texture, gardeners can stitch together the varied patterns of plants to create living tapestries. This can be accomplished in a number of ways. In a successful combination, the textures and forms of plants are so intertwined that it's often nearly impossible to separate one from the other.

Although we can feel the texture of a plant's leaves—whether bumpy, smooth, or hairy—visual texture is more critical when arranging plants into a pleasing vignette. Seeking out plants with textural variety will help ensure that your garden has subtle levels of interest (see sidebar, p. 60). It's easier to find plants with fine texture, so you may have to hunt down bold-textured ones to include in your garden. Rely more heavily on plants with interesting leaves since visual textures created by foliage will last far longer than those based primarily on the colors of blooms.

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Variety makes this combination compelling. The tooth-edged leaves of honey bush (*Melianthus major*) are contrasted by the bold foliage of taro (*Colocasia esculenta* 'Fontanesii') and the wispy blades of Mexican feather grass (*Stipa tenuissima*).

FINE TEXTURES

give the illusion of lightness or airiness to a combination. "Wispy," "ferny," "feathery," and "delicate" are just a few of the terms used to describe the visual qualities of plants with fine texture. Since it's often difficult to distinguish their exact boundaries, fine-textured plants increase the feeling of space or depth in a garden. At a distance, fine-textured plants create impressionistic effects. There are many ornamental plants with fine textures, such as ornamental grasses, thymes (*Thymus* spp. and cvs.), and love-in-a-mist (*Nigella damascena* and cvs.).

◄ **Fine-textured leaves** and flowers of cypress spurge (*Euphorbia cyparissias* 'Fen's Ruby') create an ethereal effect paired with another small-leaved perennial ground cover, golden creeping Jenny (*Lysimachia nummularia* 'Aurea').

MEDIUM TEXTURES

mediate or act as visual connectors and blenders between their more extreme fine and bold counterparts. In this way, medium-textured plants can be essential to creating subtle and harmonious combinations. Garden phloxes (*Phlox paniculata* and cvs.) and perennial salvias (*Salvia* × *sylvestris* and cvs.) are examples of plants with medium texture. Many conifers have fine-textured needles, but if these needles are arranged densely or stiffly on the branches, they can create more of a medium-textured structural outline.

◄ **Medium-textured** Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii* 'Astro Blue') is underplanted with finer-textured Peruvian lily (*Alstroemeria* 'Sweet Laura') and spurge (*Euphorbia dulcis* 'Chameleon').

BOLD TEXTURES

convey a sense of density and add visual weight. Their stronger lines can also decrease the feeling of space or depth within a garden. Some gardeners hesitate to use plants with dramatic textures, which often have the negative association of being "loud" or—let's face it—"bold and coarse." Using the terms "assertive and dynamic" may be a more positive way to depict such plants. Bold-textured plants include Japanese angelica tree (*Aralia elata* 'Aureovariegata') and many large-leaved tropicals such as taros (*Colocasia* spp. and cvs.).

◄ **The bold leaf** of fingerleaf rodgersia (*Rodgersia aesculifolia*) adds impact to this foliar trio that includes bigroot geranium (*Geranium macrorrhizum*) and 'Thalia' daffodil (*Narcissus* 'Thalia').

Contrast leaf forms
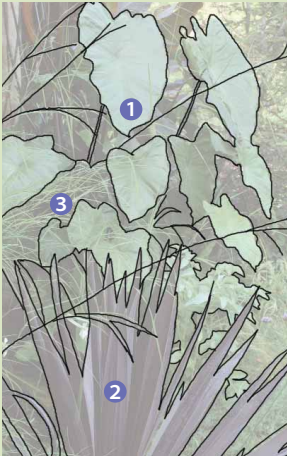
Strikingly contrasting leaf forms enhance each other in this vignette. The big, bold leaves of **taro** (*Colocasia esculenta* 'Fontanesii') ❶ and the well-defined, strong lines created by the **cordyline** (*Cordyline australis* 'Red Sensation') ❷ are tempered by the wispy texture of **bamboo muhly** (*Muhlenbergia dumosa*) ❸. The glossy surface of the taro leaves and stems also adds a sense of luxuriance to the scene.

Create pleasing proportions

To create pleasing proportions with contrasting texture, combine roughly two-thirds fine-textured plants with one-third bold-textured ones, or vice versa, depending on your desired impact. In this combination, all the plants have fine lines. However, the dense arrangement of the needles of the **pine (*Pinus sylvestris* 'Globosa')** ❶ in the foreground and the needles of the **Oriental spruce (*Picea orientalis* 'Skylands')** ❷ in the background create bold texture. In contrast, the loose texture of the **switch grass (*Panicum virgatum* 'Rehbraun')** ❸ is more subtle. The foreground is stable and anchored while the middle space is blurred, which distorts the perceived depth of the background. Soft morning light enhances the textural qualities of the dew-laden switch grass.
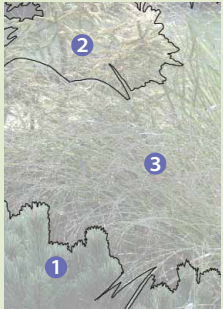
Light and distance affect visual texture

How we view texture in a garden is affected by lighting and distance. Texture is most evident in soft light, such as in early morning or late evening. We can also best appreciate the interplay of lines that create texture when we look closely at a plant. Texture is harder to see from a distance since lines blend to create the overall shapes of individual plants or plant groupings.

Balance bold-leaved textures

Texture is never viewed in isolation. Whether a plant's texture will appear to be fine, medium, or bold often depends on what it is growing near. In this vignette, two very striking plants balance each other nicely because of their similarities as well as their differences. The **corkbark fir (*Abies lasiocarpa* var. *arizonica* 'Compacta')** ❶ appears strong, static, and coarse in relation to the **grass (*Miscanthus sinensis* 'Cosmopolitan')** ❷, which also looks strong. However, the arching lines of the grass's leaves convey a flowing movement that brings softness to the pairing.