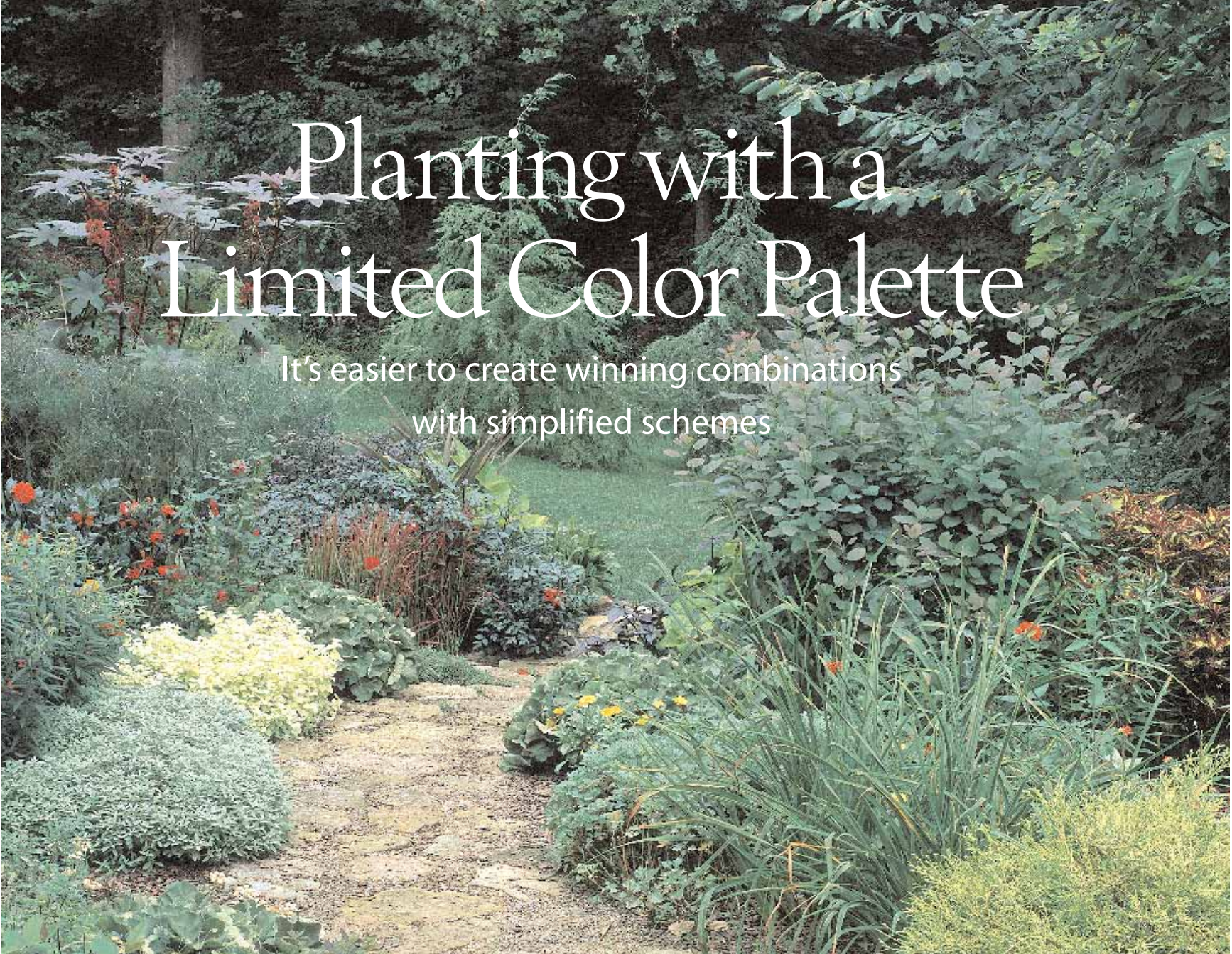


Planting with a Limited Color Palette

It's easier to create winning combinations with simplified schemes



by Tracy DiSabato-Aust

THE art of designing a bed or border can be as engaging to a gardener as painting is to an artist. For me, the most exhilarating and creative part of garden design is making dramatic plant combinations. An outstanding combination in a garden thrills me and often sends me running for my camera as I yearn for just the right light to capture the vision.

But creating these elusive “works of art” with living plants can be complicated. Form, texture, repetition, balance, and contrast are just a few key elements to consider. And then there’s

color, with its seemingly endless choices. Suddenly this exciting process can become overwhelming.

One way to simplify the design process is to reduce the number of variables. I’ve found that using a limited color palette, even a monochromatic scheme, is an effective and rewarding way to design combinations.

A monochromatic color scheme, which incorporates shades, tints, and tones of a single basic color, such as red or blue, drastically reduces color combination possibilities. A limited color

palette includes just two or three colors, such as analogous colors or one color and its complement (see sidebar, p. 44).

A key advantage of both monochromatic and limited color schemes is that they focus attention on the details and subtleties of a design. Both types emphasize the structure and rhythm of a planting. Plant form and the texture of leaf, stem, flower, and fruit are more easily appreciated. A design that is simple and cohesive in color also can convey an air of sophistication. Especially with monochromatic schemes, the

scene is less distracting, since the eye doesn't need to constantly refocus with ever-changing color. Shifts in light will play on a monochromatic scheme and deepen the mystery of its elegance.

My preference for this approach to color was greatly enhanced when I was asked by Bert and Susan Hendley to create a garden that was different from what you might usually see in the United States. The proposed border was within a larger garden in central Ohio full of unusual plants and mixed colors. To develop something that would fit, I decided to design a "colorist" garden, similar in some ways to Hadsphen Garden in Somerset, England, designed by Nori and Sandra Pope.

The garden I designed takes the visitor through the different areas of the color wheel, with individual monochromatic sections gracefully melding



Monochromatic schemes emphasize subtleties in plant forms, textures, and colors. The rounded, golden flowers of *Coreopsis tripteris* contrast with the bold linear form and delicate glossy needles of *Picea orientalis* 'Skylands'.

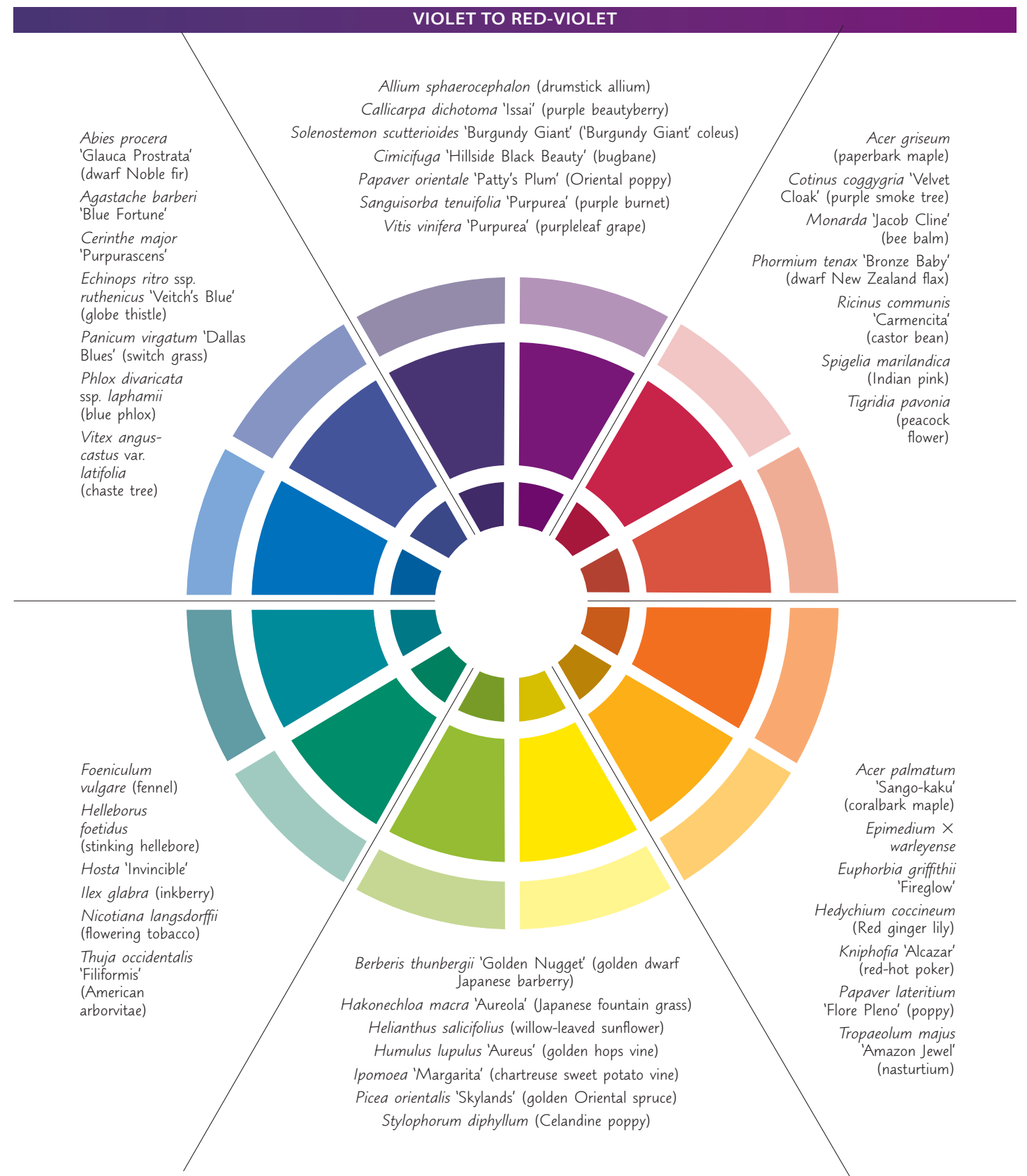
into one another (photo, p. 47). The 6,000-square-foot mixed border starts with the color red and proceeds to orange (bottom photo, p. 46), then to peach, yellow, blue, and on to purple. There's a seating area in the tranquil purple section, and then the colors continue through the border in reverse order. Each section is designed to evoke a different mood.

START WITH A SIMPLE SCHEME

So how do you choose a monochromatic or limited-palette theme? I get ideas by visiting gardens and noting which colors move me. I often review slides I've taken at other gardens and use colored pencils to sketch on paper the colors that were used in an appealing combination or vignette. This really gets my creative juices flowing. Art books, tapestries, and, of course, nature

USING THE COLOR WHEEL TO PLOT PLANT CHOICES

This diagram of the color spectrum illustrates shades (inner ring), pure hues (middle), and tints (outer).



THE HUE AND CRY OF COLOR

The following are key terms that relate to individual colors and color schemes.

HUE refers to pure color containing no white, black, or gray. Primary hues are red, yellow, and blue; orange, green, and violet are secondary hues.

VALUE refers to the degree of a color's luminosity. Lighter colors, known as tints, contain more white. Darker colors, called shades, contain more black. For example, pink is a tint of red, and maroon is a shade of red.

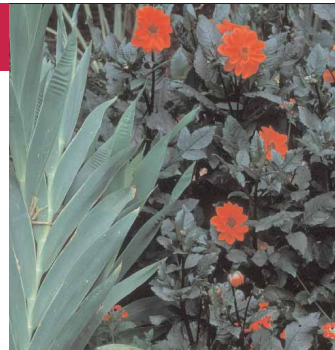
INTENSITY refers to a color's saturation. As a color becomes grayer or duller it is desaturated and referred to as a tone.

MONOCHROMATIC SCHEMES are based on a single color, including its tints, shades, and tones.

LIMITED PALETTE SCHEMES can feature just a few colors that are adjacent on the color wheel, or perhaps a color and its complement.

THE IMPACT OF ADJACENT COLORS

COMPLEMENTARY COLORS: A complementary color, one that's opposite on the color wheel (facing page), can brighten another color's intensity. For example, in an orange scheme, include some small areas of blue flowers (opposite orange on the color wheel) to create tension and brighter focal areas. In a red garden, green foliage is a ready-made brightener (photo at right).



ANALOGOUS COLORS: Analogous colors, which are adjacent on the color wheel, easily harmonize and make pleasing combinations (photo at right). Keep in mind, however, that analogous colors can have the effect of driving each color further apart. For example, when blue is next to green, the blue may appear purplish and the green yellowish. A flower that appears red when isolated from other red flowers may look muddy-pink and "wrong" among truer reds.



LIGHTS, DARKS, AND NEUTRALS: A neutral color, such as gray or brown, will make an adjacent color stand out. For example, a planting that features purple flowers will be enlivened with splashes of gray foliage (photo at right). A color's value can be lightened by placing it against a darker background. Conversely, a color's value can be darkened by placing it next to a lighter background.





COLOR CAN AFFECT THE MOOD OF A PLANTING

Color can influence our thoughts, health, and actions, thus profoundly affecting the mood of the garden and the gardener. Hot colors such as yellow, orange, bright red, and vivid magenta can evoke feelings of liveliness, vitality, and cheer. Hot colors advance toward the viewer and can make an area or combination appear closer or more prominent. Cool colors such as blue, soft pink, lilac, and creamy-white are soothing and recede from the viewer. Green is a balanced hue, neither hot nor cool, and is said to promote feelings of harmony in the viewer.

According to color theorists, each color also has subtle meanings that are worth considering. Red is said to help people cope with the demands of life. Violet is believed to foster creative inspiration and inner calm. Yellow is linked to intellectual and inspirational stimulation. Orange is said to convey optimism and a welcoming presence, and blue reportedly inspires contemplation and patience.

are all excellent sources of inspiration. Sometimes a single plant with its varying tints and shades of a color can work as a model for color in a bed or border, or in an entire garden.

You can also vary the color scheme within a section in different seasons. You may want to focus on soothing blues in spring, exploding yellows in summer, and muted oranges in autumn. Plants with foliage in blues and purples, such as *Helictotrichon sempervirens*

Sometimes a single plant with its varying tints and shades of a color can work as a model for color in a bed or border, or in an entire garden.

'Sapphire' or *Heuchera* 'Velvet Night' could be used as the unifying link in all the seasons. Since color is subjective, go with colors you like, and be brave. Plants can always be moved, so have fun playing with them.

You may want to consider tying two or more schemes together with the use of analogous colors, as I did in the colorist garden. Varying shades of green also make excellent transitional colors, since green is present in most plants. If you don't want to create a whole new garden, consider rearranging an existing border to concentrate a color theme.

If all of this seems a bit much to absorb, simply start with monochromatic themes in container plantings or in small areas of the garden using only annuals. It's a great way to ease into this approach and to clarify your personal preferences.

PLAN COLOR SCHEMES ON PAPER

Even though great garden combinations can happen by chance, taking the time to plan a color scheme is usually essential to creating awe-inspiring results. I suggest making a list of all the plants that fit into your chosen scheme, including those with foliage in that color. Books, catalogs, and magazines are helpful references. Just keep in mind that colors may differ slightly from how they are pictured or described. Also consider what other color or col-



One way to design with a limited palette is to use colors that are adjacent on the color wheel. The *Canna* 'Orange Crunch' in the center is surrounded by other similar-hued plants, including low mounds of *Zinnia angustifolia* 'Star Orange'.

ors you might use for accents, and list potential plants in that category.

For each plant, consider the color of all its aspects—flowers, foliage, fruit, bark, and autumn color. It's helpful to further organize your list by bloom time, and to make notes about habit, form, and texture.

Once you settle on a color—say, blue—you may find that every time you see a new blue flower in someone

else's garden, at a lecture, or in a picture, you're eager to find it for your blue garden. To say that designing with color can become an obsession is an understatement and is a big part of the fun.

Developing monochromatic or limited color schemes can take you to a new level of design and pleasure in your garden. As I've explored the subtle beauty of varying tints, tones, and shades of a single color, I've found both

Simplified color schemes can be combined to create a garden with a variety of moods. The author designed this garden as a series of monochromatic schemes based on the sequence of the color wheel.

solace and excitement in discovering that "less is more." ☺

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