

Aralia ‘Sun King’ has made it to top ten perennial status.

Sometimes a perennial is so good you want to get on a soapbox or scream about it from the rooftop. *Aralia* ‘Sun King’ is one of those perennials. I discovered this plant a few years ago and love it more every year.

Aralia ‘Sun King’ has many characteristics of its parent, *Aralia cordata*, commonly called Japanese spikenard and mountain asparagus. *Aralia cordata* has very large, dark green, compound leaves (made up of leaflets) and spikes of white flowers that begin blooming in late summer. Birds love the reddish-purple berries that follow flowers in fall.

Aralia cordata is a lovely perennial that is sadly often overlooked. It is attractive toward the back of a shady border where its large, dark green leaves provide a backdrop for fine-foliaged perennials like ferns or plants with golden foliage like hostas.

Thanks to plant hunter, Barry Yinger, we now have *Aralia* ‘Sun King’. He reportedly found it in the nursery of a department store in Japan and brought it to the U.S. Unlike its parent, it is not content to play a supporting role in the landscape. Like rays of sunshine, its large leaves emerge bright gold in spring and retain their color if they receive a few hours of direct sun each day. In a shadier situation, leaves turn chartreuse.

Later in summer, showy spikes of small white flowers attract pollinators. Spent flowers turn to reddish-purple berries that are enjoyed by birds in fall. Plants may self-sow wherever berries fall to the ground. I have several planted around my landscape and have yet to get a seedling, but I remain hopeful for some free plants in the future.

Plant *Aralia* ‘Sun King’ in a partly shaded or woodland garden with well-drained soil. Amend the soil with compost when planting. Its growth is determined by its growing conditions, remaining as small as two to three feet tall and wide in dry, shady conditions and reaching up to six feet tall and wide in moist, partly sunny areas.

Provide shelter from strong winds if it is being planted in an exposed area. *Aralia* ‘Sun King’ is rarely bothered by insects or disease and is not on the preferred menu of deer or rabbits.

If you are not already in your car heading toward your local garden center, let me get back on my soapbox just a bit longer. *Aralia* ‘Sun King’ sports large golden leaves that brighten a partly-shaded garden. It quickly grows three to six feet tall and wide, flowers in late summer when other blooms are waning, and birds love their berries in the fall. Did I mention rabbits and deer tend to leave it alone?

Diana Stoll is a horticulturist, garden writer, and the garden center manager at The Planter’s Palette in Winfield, IL. She blogs at gardenwithdiana.com.