



## SIZE MATTERS: CREATING LEAFY INTEREST IN THE GARDEN

There's a story often told in gardening circles that goes something like this: A famous English horticulturist is invited to visit the domain of an American gardener. As the pair moves through the landscape, every unusual plant is pointed out, every stunning bloom is commented upon. At the end of the tour, the American asks the Brit his perception of her creation, and he responds, "But my dear, all of your leaves are the same size."

Deflating as such an evaluation might have been to its recipient, the message merits consideration, for contrast is key to dynamic garden design. As zealous collectors, it would seem that the odds are in our favor: after all, with an endless supply of appealing plants, we're bound to choose some with noticeably large or delightfully diminutive leaves. Yet in our quest for bounteous bloom and constant color, we often overlook opportunities to add interest to our gardens with the careful placement of a variety of foliage sizes and shapes.

Of all the techniques designers employ as they develop garden schemes, conscious efforts to create contrast add the most

striking impact to a landscape. Contrast stops the sweep of the eye, implying that something visually important is at hand. Contrast can re-direct the line of sight, signaling us to look upward or outward. By stimulating our associations with other landscapes, contrast can set a mood in the garden. Bold leaves, largely exotic to the midwestern scene, may remind us of steamier locales.

In the overhead plane, leaf size affects our access to light. Think of a Norway maple: its large leaves are closely arranged on a tightly branching form, creating a shade canopy so dense that under planting becomes a challenge. Now imagine a Honey Locust, tiny leaflets held on slender petioles, sparingly spaced along open, arching branches—dappled shade at its finest. A yard filled with Norway Maples would be oppressive in its darkness, yet a landscape planted exclusively with airy Honey Locusts would offer slight shelter from the scorching sun. The use of either might signal the intended use of an area: it's easy to picture a cool retreat beneath the maple, a colorful garden of perennials under the locust.

Landscape design recognizes

vertical space as the plane of enclosure, and boldly-foliaged plants, both perennial and woody, offer instant mass not often found in their little-leaved counterparts.

It is not only the size of individual leaves that contributes to a plant's perceived mass, but also the way the leaves are arrayed on the plant. When large leaves are held sparsely, each one silhouetted against its backdrop, a plant has a dramatic, sculptural quality. Oakleaf hydrangeas and bottlebrush buckeyes illustrate this effect beautifully. A similarly loose distribution of small leaves results in a plant that will be described as airy or open. Large leaves, tightly arranged, create hulking, shrubby masses. And when small leaves are densely arranged, the eye reads only the outline of the plant – think of dwarf spirea or Kalmswort St. John (particularly when viewed at a distance).



The contrast of leaf size makes

In gardens where trees and shrubs are well established, an easy and effective way to add visual interest is through the introduction of perennials and annuals with contrasting leaf and flower sizes. Let's look at some of the giants first.



Leaves are the real attraction of hostas, and few genres have more foliar variety than this plant group, with many leaves measured in feet rather than inches. Hostas aren't the only broad-leafed shade lovers, though. The pizza-sized leaves of *Ligularia* add plum tones to the mix, and the bold greenery of *Rodgersia* resembles horse chestnut. *Gunnera* and *Podophyllum* thrive in moist, shady environments, and their tropical good looks set just the right mood pond-side.

*Bergenia* is also an extremely useful large-leafed shade plant: its short stature helps to bring foliage mass to the front of the border – and it's evergreen with broad spears of heavily-

Sun plants are frequently small-leafed plants, since narrow leaves are more efficient consumers of water and therefore experience greater success in difficult conditions. A few sun loving giants stand out, however. The deeply cut leaves of May-blooming *Valerian officinalis* can grow to three feet in length, simultaneously lacy and bold.

Two perennials offer gorgeous vase-shaped clumps of foliage composed of yard-long leaves. *Inula*, which bears shaggy golden daisies held at the six-foot level; and horseradish foliage.

Occasionally striking contrasts occur in a single plant. *Cephalaria gigantea* combines big, dramatic leaves beneath delicate pale yellow pincushion flowers held on wiry stems.

For close-up viewing, finely textured leaves provide stunning counterpoint to perennial combinations. *Corydalis*, *Dicentra formosa*, and *Aruncus aesthusifolius* offer intricate leaf patterns at the shady ground level. And *Coreopsis* 'Moonbeam' isn't the only delicate option for sun. *Artemesia* 'Silver Mound' presents a hazy cushion of white, and the two-foot plume-like stems of *Linaria purpurea* are softly iridescent blue-green.

So should a knowledgeable visitor make his way into your garden, be prepared. Deflect demoralizing criticism with a stunning selection of varied foliage.