

A FALL SAMPLER

Five experts pick their favorite plant for autumn display.

Salvia 'Indigo Spires'

THOUGH IT BEGINS TO BLOOM in late spring or early summer, *Salvia* 'Indigo Spires' surges to a crescendo of unruly flamboyance in fall. Like Medusa's serpentine tresses, its curiously contorted, foot-long floral spikes, composed of tightly packed whorls of small, iridescent, violet-blue blossoms, coil about in all directions and, bouncing with bumblebees, seem to take on a life of their own. The striking color works with strong, hot oranges and golds, such as *Cosmos* 'Bright Lights', and with calmer, cooler pinks, light yellow, or silver as well.

A sterile hybrid thought to be a cross between *S. farinacea* and *S. longispicata*, *Salvia* 'Indigo Spires' quickly forms a stiff, open shrub, four feet high and wide, with soft, faintly fuzzy, musky, medium green leaves.

Root-hardy in USDA Zones 7b to 10, it can be treated as an annual elsewhere.

This elegant if eccentric creature enjoys full sun in well-drained, moderately moist, humus-rich soil. A loose mulch conserves moisture in summer and insulates the roots in winter (where it's hardy). An occasional light pruning encourages a fuller shape and more flowers. *Salvia* 'Indigo Spires' is a hit with butterflies and hummingbirds, too. —Carol Bishop Miller

Corydalis lutea

ALL THE BEST FLOWERS are yellow, and of all the yellows my favorite is *Corydalis lutea*. The word *corydalis* is Greek for crested lark—a reference to the flowers' shape—but yellow corydalis is the only common name I can track down. Or you can call it "that great

Salvia 'Indigo Spires'

LIGHT: Full sun

SOIL: Moderately moist, humus-rich, well draining soil.

HARDINESS:

USDA Zones

7b–10





Corydalis

LIGHT: Full sun to partial shade

SOIL: Light, well-draining soil

HARDINESS:

USDA Zones
3–10

little yellow flower that never stops blooming,” as I do. And it does bloom all season. *Corydalis lutea* is the impatiens of the perennial world. (In fact, impatiens is also a perennial, but only where it’s balmy in January.)

Corydalis lutea begins flowering in early spring—small, four-petaled, tubular, bright yellow blossoms—and keeps going until it’s too cold to care what’s happening outside. It has lovely gray-green, or glaucous, finely cut leaves that are almost fernlike, and clumps grow about a foot tall. Plants do well in sun or partial shade and prefer moist but well-drained soil. And don’t believe the plant encyclopedias—it’s hardy throughout USDA Zone 4 and worth giving a try if you live in Zone 3.

Until recently, when it began appearing in catalogs and at nurseries, *C. lutea* was one of horticulture’s best-kept secrets. All the major-league gardeners had it, of course, and one of them gave it to me, but it was little seen in general commerce. Gardeners are a generous lot, but frankly, it’s easy to be generous with this plant, for it reseeds vigorously. It also pulls up easily—its rhizomatous roots are shallow—in case you worry that it will engulf your epimediums and eranthis. On the contrary, it makes a perfect companion for these and others in border settings or as specimens on walls and in paving cracks, where it’s elegant good looks belie its sturdiness. —Karan Davis Cutler

Leadwort

IN THE FALL, the garden seems to develop a split personality where color is concerned. On the one hand, there are those plants, like chrysanthemums,

that display the traditionally “autumn” colors—oranges, reds, bronzes, yellows. On the other, there are the late-blooming asters and many of the tender salvias that pour on the cool, misty colors—purples, mauves, and blues. The delightful thing about *Ceratostigma plumbaginoides* (let’s just agree to call it leadwort) is that it displays both sorts of colors, at least during the autumn months. The hot color comes from the foliage, which grows from nine inches to a foot tall and stays an ordinary green for most of the summer. As fall approaches, however, it takes on reddish tints, and by the time the season is in full swing, it has deepened to a shameless, A-for-adultery scarlet. The flowers provide the cool component. Though not large (one-half to three-quarters of an inch across is the average), they are the pure, brilliant blue of a clear October sky, and are borne abundantly from late summer into the fall amid bristly, rust-colored calyxes. To refer to so scintillating a creature as a groundcover seems crass, yet that is just what leadwort is, where it is hardy (Zones 5–10). It would be difficult to cover the ground any more beautifully. —Christopher Ritter



Leadwort

LIGHT: Full sun
SOIL: Loamy, well-draining soil
HARDINESS:
USDA Zones
 5–10

By the time the season is in full swing, leadwort's foliage has deepened to a shameless, A-for-adultery scarlet.

Acer semenovii

WOODY PLANTS ADAPTED to the harsh, dry climate and alkaline clay soils of the interior West are hard to come by, especially ones with interesting features. Usually just the fact that a tree or shrub has leaves and grows ensures it a place in our long-suffering hearts. *Acer tataricum* subsp. *semenovii* (also seen as *A. semenovii* and *A. ginnala* var. *semenovii*), the Turkestan shrub maple, is one such plant—a multistemmed 15-foot toughie with a lot going for it.

Turkestan shrub maple sports the shiny, dark green, three- to five-lobed foliage of the Amur maple, *A. ginnala*, yet even smaller and more finely cut. It also has that species' outrageous red fall color. It shares Tatarian maple's tolerance for high pH and clay, without the abhorrent yellow foliage chlorosis that Amur maple suffers in such soils

In mid-spring, a multitude of creamy flowers in small panicles exude a sweet, almost lily-of-the-valley fragrance. These go on to form pairs of small, reddish, winged samaras. Red also features strongly in the leaf petioles and midribs of the immature foliage, a hint of the stunning fall display to come. The bark on my young plant is a smooth, pale gray, which is nice in winter.

The tree is fast-growing but not prone to wind or snow

breakage—in four years a six-inch plant has grown to more than five feet on my windy hillside, where it receives less than 20 inches of moisture a year, a rare feat for a woody plant. —Lauren Springer

Kirengeshoma

TO EARN ITS KEEP in my garden, a plant must be distinctive at ten paces. I want maximum return from each square foot of planting, and one plant that



Acer semenovii

LIGHT: Full sun
SOIL: Average well-draining soil
HARDINESS:
USDA Zones
 3-7

To earn its keep in my garden, a plant must be distinctive at ten paces, and one plant that never lets me down is *Kirengeshoma palmata*.

never lets me down is *Kirengeshoma palmata*.

A native of Japanese woodlands, this hardy (USDA Zone 5) herbaceous perennial has thrived in two distinctly different parts of my garden, in both situations gradually expanding into substantial clumps. My “sunny” clump is located beside a wrought-iron gate, where its nearly black stems create a striking echo, which is made even more beautiful in late summer as the stems arch slightly to showcase the countless soft yellow shuttlecock flowers. In my garden, flowering starts in August and continues for four to six weeks. Really hot sun will burn the foliage of this member of the hydrangea family, however, and if I gardened anywhere but the Pacific Northwest, I might not get away with this location.

Not far away from the sunny clump, but in total shade, another clump grows at half speed—just as elegant but with far fewer stems and flowers.

Moisture is essential for this plant—indeed, it asks for little else. By late June my plants are four feet high with side branches beginning to fill out. They will be followed by slender buds. The flowers are intriguing—each petal is almost as thick as a banana peel, and very similar in color and texture. Autumn turns the leaves to gold, and my plants produce nigella-like seed pods that are held rigidly and look great in winter—another asset for a terrific plant.



Kirengeshoma

LIGHT: Partial shade to full shade
SOIL: Rich humusy, moist soil
HARDINESS: USDA Zones 5–7

There are two types of kirengeshomas available, but they are so similar in all respects that it is generally believed they are all one species. However, the flower petals of a Korean variant, known as *K. palmata* Korean Group, are slightly more flared than those of the regular species.

Plants that associate well with kirengeshoma include the herbaceous clematis *C. ×juiniana* ‘Mrs. Robert Brydon’—the very pale blue flowers are an equal to the particularly soft shade of yellow of kirengeshoma flowers. A tuft or two of *Hakonechloa macra* ‘Aureola’ near or at the feet of your kirengeshoma will echo the lovely “wax bell” flowers of this aristocrat of the late-summer garden. —Thomas Hobbs ♡

Resources

The following books all discuss plants and planting ideas for making the most of this season:

Autumn Gardens, Ethne Clarke (Soma Books, 1999)

Christopher Lloyd's Gardening Year, Christopher Lloyd (Frances Lincoln, 1999)

My Garden in Autumn and Winter, E.A. Bowles (Timber Press, 1998)

The Garden in Autumn, Allen Lacy (Henry Holt, 1990)

The Year at North Hill, Wayne Winterrowd and Joe Eck (Henry Holt, 1996)