

CULTIVATE THE RAINBOW

Lorene Edwards Forkner ahandmadegarden.com

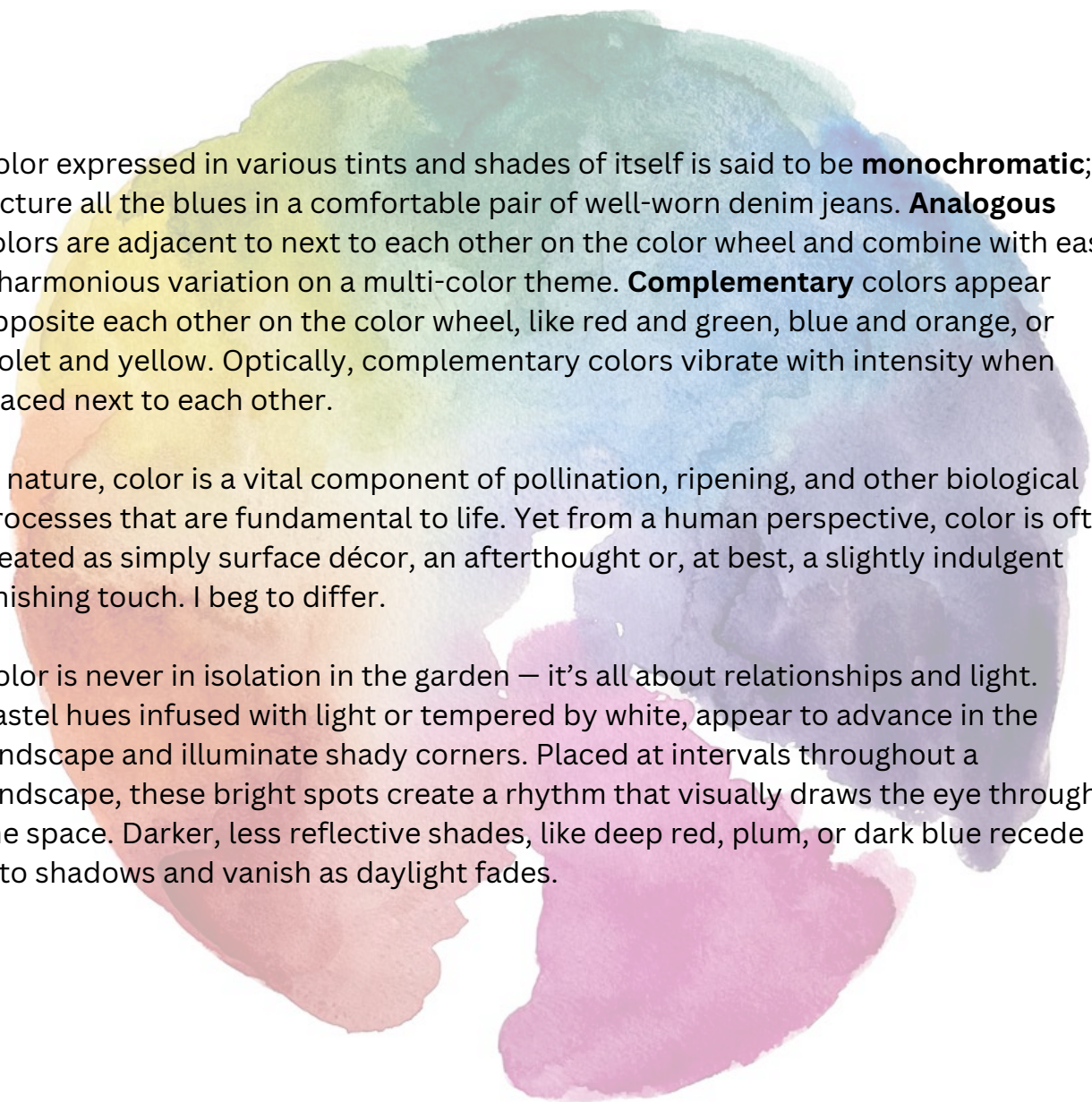
A color wheel is a way to decode the relationship between colors. Primary colors, blue, red, and yellow, are made only of themselves and often referred to as the building blocks of all other colors. Combine any two primary colors and the result is a secondary color, for instance yellow + red = orange



Color expressed in various tints and shades of itself is said to be **monochromatic**; picture all the blues in a comfortable pair of well-worn denim jeans. **Analogous** colors are adjacent to next to each other on the color wheel and combine with ease, a harmonious variation on a multi-color theme. **Complementary** colors appear opposite each other on the color wheel, like red and green, blue and orange, or violet and yellow. Optically, complementary colors vibrate with intensity when placed next to each other.

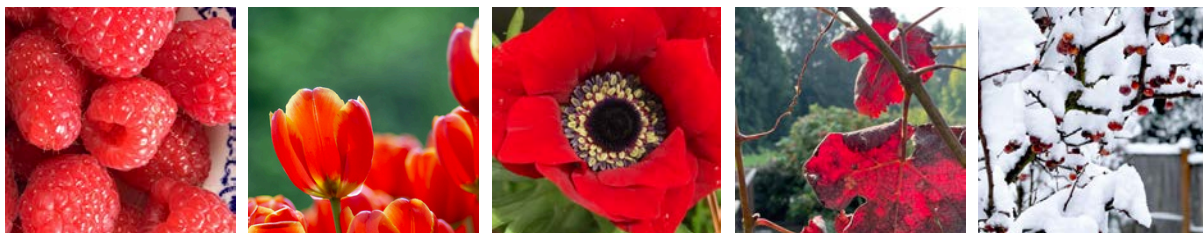
In nature, color is a vital component of pollination, ripening, and other biological processes that are fundamental to life. Yet from a human perspective, color is often treated as simply surface décor, an afterthought or, at best, a slightly indulgent finishing touch. I beg to differ.

Color is never in isolation in the garden – it's all about relationships and light. Pastel hues infused with light or tempered by white, appear to advance in the landscape and illuminate shady corners. Placed at intervals throughout a landscape, these bright spots create a rhythm that visually draws the eye through the space. Darker, less reflective shades, like deep red, plum, or dark blue recede into shadows and vanish as daylight fades.



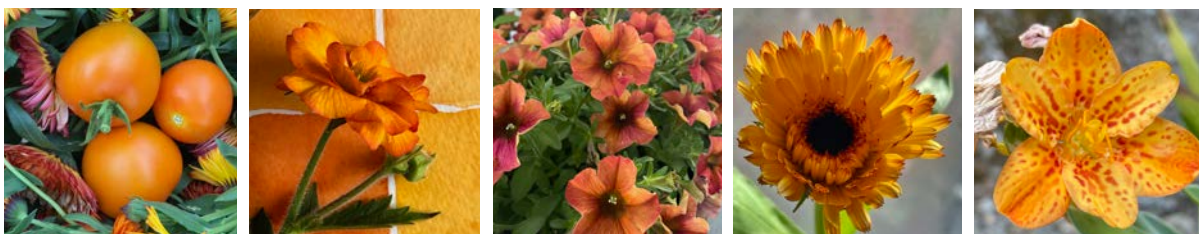
THE NATURE OF COLOR

The following romp through the rainbow characterizes each color and how it behaves. I'll leave it to you to select your favorite plants and colors to create a vibrant landscape.



There's nothing subtle about **red** in the garden, or anywhere else for that matter. Red is exciting, arresting and even agitating. Ever the showboat, red draws attention to itself, often at the expense of more subtle colors around it. In a bed of spring blooming pastel tulips, the errant red blossom dominates the display like a clanging cymbal.

Green, the most dominant color in a landscape and the complement of red, amplifies red's innate energy during the day, while distance and low light shift dark red into a black hole. Moderate red's impact by pairing it with similar analogous hues, such as plum or scarlet, and site plants along pathways and edges, where they can be appreciated. Closely related to red, pink in all its varied personalities from soft and shy to bold magenta is the most commonly occurring flower color in nature.



Many gardeners dismiss **orange** as being too strident. The marriage of red + yellow, I prefer to think of this glowing hue as spirited, tart and sassy, filled with a generous energy that pairs well with other strong colors like magenta or lime green. Mellow shades of melon or peach tame gregarious orange to polite company.

Technically, blue is the complement of orange but as we'll see, true blue is rare in the plant world. Look to foliage in shades of silver and teal to settle orange down. Burnished to brown, bronze blossoms and amber foliage provide warmth and contrast in a predominantly green landscape. Perhaps these more tarnished tones are less of an affront to delicate tempers than true orange, brown's loud, sometimes-bratty little sister.



When looking at a landscape, luminosity—actual daylight—determines how we see color. In the thin light of spring, a creamy **yellow** tulip appears radiant, yet chrome yellow forsythia, while an ebullient end to winter, can seem a bit brash among pastel blooms. A few months later, brilliant school-bus yellow blooms and golden foliage stand up to the strong light of summer, holding their own with other saturated hues.

Yellow is the brightest color on the spectrum. Another common color in nature, yellow plants and blossoms are the most visible, even in low light. As gardeners we can place plants to harness the time of day and leverage light to spectacular effect, like using lemony flowers and golden foliage to illuminate shady corners. Dreamy pastel yellow blooms bring sunshine to a gray day, but—like forsythia in spring—blinding yellow requires strong colorful co-horts.



Green can't help itself. It is the most powerful color in a landscape. Reaching back into collective human history, a verdant environment filled with plants and tall grasses indicated a safe and nourishing environment. Maybe that's why we humans can distinguish more shades of green than any other color on the spectrum. Our very lives once hinged on green.

Green in the garden is ubiquitous. Seemingly invisible, hidden in plain sight. Faced with a purely green landscape, most gardeners yearn for “a spot of color” to leaven the constancy of all that potent fertility. Yet green is more than a color; it is the photosynthetic driver that powers our existence, feeding our bodies and filling our lungs with breath.

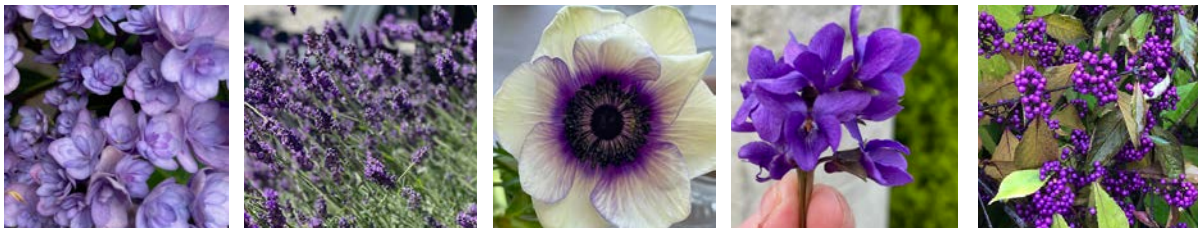


Northwest Flower & Garden Festival 2025



At first glance, **blue** is everywhere in the natural world. From bluebird skies to vast oceans, rivers, and lakes, blue is expansive. For artists, blue is transcendent, an ecstatic, even holy pigment. Receding into the distance, blue cultivates spaciousness and invites calm. Blue is the most popular “favorite” of colors. From comfortable denim to an authoritarian military uniform, blue carries a world of contradiction.

Yet, in the world of flowering plants, fewer than 10 percent produce truly blue blooms. So many purportedly blue flowers lean toward violet, beautiful but decidedly not blue. While gardeners can easily source and tend true blue bachelor buttons, borage, and the humble forget-me-not, we yearn for blue poppies, fussy gentians or the illusive blue rose.



Is it **violet** or is it purple? Violet is a spectral color created by wavelengths that are shorter than visible light. Only bees, birds and some bats can see ultraviolet. While in theory, purple is a secondary color that results from mixing red + blue, two primary colors that are challenging to combine, often frustrating artists with a muddy pigment. Sometimes energy defies pigment.

Yet even a short list of the various names that purple goes by—lavender, lilac, orchid, plum, amethyst, eggplant, blackberry—demonstrates how common the color is in nature. It seems, light and living tissue are key to capturing this illusive hue. That’s excellent news for gardeners who can paint garden pictures with violet blooms creating beautiful compositions of an invisible hue.



A HANDMADE GARDEN

CULTIVATING A GOOD & DELICIOUS LIFE



Lorene Edwards Forkner is an author, maker and speaker whose work centers on exploring the wonders of the natural world. She regularly contributes to the GROW column in *Pacific NW magazine* that appears in *The Seattle Times*.

Visit ahandmadegarden.com to learn more about upcoming workshops, recent writing and browse the collection in her online store.

Enter the code: **NWFG25** at checkout to get free shipping on orders placed before 2/28/25.



CULTIVATING COLOR

tending a good & delicious life

Cultivating Color is my weekly newsletter published on Substack. Every week subscribers receive a round up of color studies and observations, as well as a brief dispatch of inspiration every Monday. Once a month I'll include seasonal rambliings, recent writing, book recommendations, information about upcoming classes and workshop, and special discount offers for good in my store and online classes.

Cultivating Color emails are free, although becoming a paid subscribers can access all archived content. Everyone, free or otherwise, has my eternal gratitude.