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50 Shades of Green

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Foliage as the Foundation of the Garden

Many gardeners seek to have something in bloom all year round. Some plant masses of long-blooming annuals; others prefer the sequential display provided by a diverse collection of perennials. However, the reality is that for most of the growing season our gardens are dominated by foliage. While we may not think about foliage first when choosing what to plant, we should definitely consider how our garden will look when it's not at the height of the bloom season.



Foliage Fits Every Garden Style

Foliage provides the backdrop and foundation for nearly every gardening style. The differences come in which plants you choose and how you arrange them within your garden. Your garden might most closely fall into one of these styles, although there is definitely overlap among some of them:

- Informal
- Formal
- Woodland
- Japanese Inspired
- Front Yards
- Tropical & Desert
- Containers



No matter the style of your garden, think about how it will look throughout the year. You can create many different feelings with your foliage choices, whether you lean toward mostly natives or seek out exotic plants from around the world. The look might be soft and serene, lush or sparse, whimsical and playful, naturalistic and in harmony with the wider environment, or architectural. You can go for harmony or contrast, engage in zone denial, or take an "if it comes up in a nice place let it be" attitude. The stylistic choice is yours and the possibilities nearly endless.

Seek Contrast

The garden where all the plants look very similar is less interesting than one where contrasts abound. Even in a hosta collector's garden, the different leaf sizes, colors, and variegation patterns provide contrast.

Texture: Foliage can be sharp and spikey, soft and fuzzy, firm and leathery, thin and delicate, or nearly anything in between. Consider how the linear sharp-pointed leaves of a yucca differ from the softness of native thimbleberries, or how the long leaves of daylilies differ from Rodgersia's palmate compound leaves. Maple-like leaves contrast with the smoother edges of hostas. Rhododendrons have thick, leathery leaves while those of a dogwood are thinner and more delicate.



Size: Contrasting sizes can be differences in individual leaves or entire plants. You don't have to go all the way to gigantic *Gunnera* leaves to create contrasts, but think about planting larger-leaved specimens with plants that have more petite foliage. Low-growing groundcovers and front-of-the-border perennials contrast nicely with taller shrubs and small trees.



Color: Foliage comes in many shades of green, ranging from blues to yellows and reds. Blue oat grass contrasts with the yellow tones of Japanese forest grass; the blueish needles of a Deodora cedar contrast with a yellowish Japanese cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica*). Think in terms of foliage on opposite sides of the color wheel for maximum contrast.



Contrast can also come from seasonality, including bloom time and color changes in foliage from spring to autumn. Think about how broad-leaved or needle-bearing evergreen plants can provide interest in an otherwise brown winter garden.

Foliage Gallery

This selection of plants grown mostly for their foliage is just to give you some inspiration and perhaps introduce you to the possibilities when you think about designing or updating your garden. It's far from an exhaustive list.

	<p>Snowline Japanese Sedge [<i>Carex conica</i> 'Hime-kan-suge']</p> <p>Many other sedges are also fine choices for fine-textured foliage. They're generally hardy and you'll find them with many different foliage colors, as well as varieties suited for wet or dry habitats.</p>
	<p>Windmill Palm [<i>Trachycarpus fortunei</i>]</p> <p>This is one of the few (maybe only?) palm trees that is winter-hardy in the Puget Sound region. It gets to be a big specimen, growing 6–12 inches per year to an ultimate height of 20 feet or more.</p>
	<p>Maidenhair Fern [<i>Adiantum pedatum</i> or <i>Adiantum aleuticum</i>]</p> <p>This deciduous native fern prefers a moist habitat and partial shade. When established in the garden it can be quite vigorous.</p>
	<p>Hops [<i>Humulus lupulus</i>]</p> <p>Hops are a vigorous, high-climbing deciduous vine. Golden hops foliage contrasts nicely with darker green plants. The foliage is a bit on the rough side, as are the stems.</p>
	<p>Ostrich Ferns [<i>Matteuccia struthiopteris</i>]</p> <p>Deciduous and native to much of northeastern North America, ostrich ferns grow up to 3 feet tall and have an upright habit. They prefer partial shade and moist, humusy soil.</p>

	<p>Pine [<i>Pinus</i> sp.]</p> <p>Choose from many species and varieties of pines, both native and not. Needles can be relatively short like lodgepole or long and graceful like ponderosa, for a couple of examples.</p>
	<p>Hosta [<i>Hosta</i> cv.]</p> <p>There are over 3,000 named hosta varieties. Most prefer partial shade and reasonable moisture. They're also a favorite deer food so if you have deer in your garden they're not the best choice.</p>
	<p>Blue China Fir [<i>Cunninghamia lanceolata</i> 'Glauca']</p> <p>This evergreen tree can reach 75 feet in cultivation, but has delightful foliage.</p>
	<p>May Lily aka False Lily of the Valley [<i>Maianthemum dilatatum</i>]</p> <p>A fine Northwest woodland native groundcover which goes dormant in the winter. Prefers partial shade and decent moisture. Rhizomatous and can spread aggressively.</p>
	<p>Purple Sage [<i>Salvia officinalis</i> 'Purpurea']</p> <p>This herb (culinary sage) comes in several different foliage colors. It's a woody sub-shrub that thrives in full sun and is semi-evergreen.</p>

	<p>Japanese Coltsfoot (Fuki) [<i>Petasites japonicus</i>]</p> <p>Leaves can get to be 16–32 inches across, on stems up to 3 feet tall. It will spread rhizomatously in moist part-shade conditions.</p>
	<p>Japanese Painted Fern [<i>Athyrium nipponicum</i> 'Pictum']</p> <p>Forms nice clumps over a few years in a moist part-shade environment.</p>
	<p>Ginkgo [<i>Ginkgo biloba</i>]</p> <p>This deciduous tree is grown for its interesting foliage that turns a stunning yellow before dropping its leaves in autumn. Several cultivars are available, including dwarf and columnar forms. The straight species can get quite large.</p>
	<p>Wallich's Wood Fern [<i>Dryopteris wallichiana</i>]</p> <p>This vase-shaped semi-evergreen fern grows to 4 ft. tall in partial to full shade and is deer resistant.</p>
	<p>Lady's Mantle [<i>Alchemilla mollis</i>]</p> <p>Thrives in full sun, where it can spread vigorously. Cut the spent flowers to enjoy the foliage until it dies back in autumn.</p>

	<p>Aeonium [<i>Aeonium</i> sp.]</p> <p>Aeoniums are sub-tropical succulents that grow best in full sun and well-drained soil. While they bloom, they're mostly grown for their foliage, which comes in several colors.</p>
	<p>'Golden Sword' Variegated Yucca [<i>Yucca filamentosa</i> 'Golden Sword'] (left) and Linear Leaf Yucca [<i>Yucca linearifolia</i> aka <i>Yucca rostrata</i> var. <i>linearis</i>] (right)</p> <p>These and other yuccas grow in full sun and can be striking with their upright sharp-tipped leaves.</p>
	<p>Redwood Sorrel [<i>Oxalis oregana</i>]</p> <p>This Northwest native groundcover is semi-evergreen in mild winters. It thrives, and can spread vigorously, in partial shade and decent soil.</p>
	<p>Douglas Maple [<i>Acer glabrum</i> var. <i>douglasii</i>]</p> <p>A small native tree (more common east of the Cascades) which will grow in both full sun and partial shade.</p>
	<p>Beaked Hazelnut [<i>Corylus cornuta</i>]</p> <p>Our native hazelnut is difficult to distinguish from the cultivated hazelnut [<i>Corylus avellana</i>] when not in fruit. Both will grow in full sun or partial shade and tolerate our dry summers. Squirrels will get the nuts before you do.</p>

	<p>'Sunset' Houseleek [<i>Sempervivum tectorum</i> 'Sunset']</p> <p>This is just one of many varieties of this common succulent, which will spread slowly in full sun and well-drained soil. You'll find many colors of foliage available.</p>
	<p>Mountain Hemlock [<i>Tsuga mertensiana</i>]</p> <p>Native, and slower growing than its close relative western hemlock [<i>T. heterophylla</i>], this will eventually be a large tree. It prefers full sun, but will also grow in partial shade.</p>
	<p>Blue Elderberry [<i>Sambucus cerulea</i>]</p> <p>Native, and bearing copious quantities of edible fruit, plant this in full sun or partial shade. Its close relative, red elderberry [<i>Sambucus racemosa</i>], grows in similar conditions. Birds will strip the ripe fruit off both in a couple of days.</p>
	<p>Noble Fir [<i>Abies procera</i>]</p> <p>This native conifer is a favorite Christmas tree for many families. Grow it in full sun and expect it to eventually become a large tree.</p>
	<p>Agave [<i>Agave</i> sp.]</p> <p>Grown for their spikey foliage, agaves need full sun and well-drained soil. After many years they'll put up a flower stalk, bloom, and then die.</p>

	<p>Oak Ferns among Wild Ginger [<i>Gymnocarpium disjunctum</i>; <i>Asarum caudatum</i>]</p> <p>Both of these are native woodland groundcovers that grow best in part shade with some summer moisture. They will spread slowly. Wild ginger is evergreen in mild winters.</p>
	<p>Moss</p> <p>There are many, many species of moss native to the Northwest. When they show up in your garden you can weed out competing plants and let the moss become your groundcover.</p>
	<p>Piggy-back Plant [<i>Tolmiea menziesii</i>]</p> <p>This Northwest woodland native will slowly spread to form a nice groundcover in shade or partial shade. With some moisture its foliage can look good all summer and it's semi-evergreen so even in winter it may look decent.</p>
	<p>Dull (Low) Oregon-grape [<i>Mahonia nervosa</i>]</p> <p>This, along with its cousin shining Oregon-grape [<i>Mahonia aquifolium</i>], are great native shrubs. They both grow in either full sun or partial shade, bloom early in the spring, produce copious fruit, and are evergreen. The new growth is shown in the right-hand photo.</p>
	<p>Green Cutleaf Japanese Maple [<i>Acer palmatum</i> cv.] (left) and an unknown cultivar (right)</p> <p>Japanese Maples come in many sizes, habits, and leaf forms.</p>

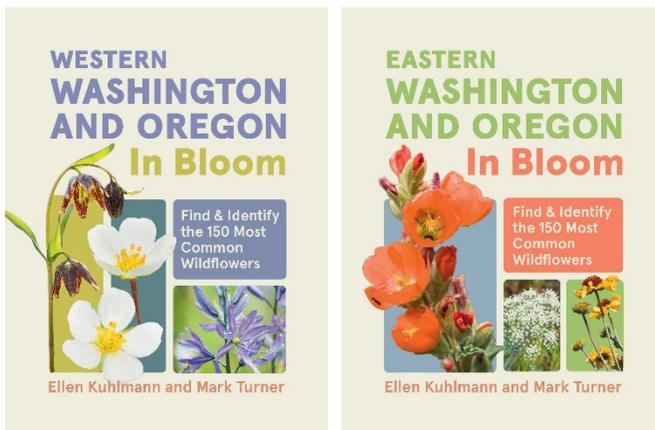
	<p>Vine Maple [<i>Acer circinatum</i>]</p> <p>This is our common Northwest native small maple. It has great fall color and will grow in full sun or part shade.</p>
	<p>Bishop's Hat [<i>Epimedium</i> cv.]</p> <p>There are many <i>Epimedium</i> species and cultivars, grown mostly as groundcovers for their foliage. They're best in partial shade and will tolerate fairly dry conditions.</p>
	<p>Himalayan or Evergreen Maidenhair Fern [<i>Adiantum venustum</i>]</p> <p>This is a semi-evergreen colonizing fern best in part shade and a rich humusy soil.</p>
	<p>'Everlime' Japanese Sedge [<i>Carex oshimensis</i> 'Everlime']</p> <p>A clump-forming sedge that thrives in full sun with moderate moisture.</p>
	<p>Sword Fern [<i>Polystichum munitum</i>]</p> <p>This is a tough Northwest native evergreen fern that thrives in part shade and reasonable quality soil. Mature plants can be 3–4 ft. across and 3 ft. tall.</p>
	<p>Blue Grama grass [<i>Bouteloua gracilis</i>]</p> <p>Native to much of North America (but not Washington), this prairie species thrives in full sun and tolerates a wide range of drier soils.</p>

	<p>Salmonberry [<i>Rubus spectabilis</i>]</p> <p>This Northwest native shrub is best known for its very early magenta blossoms, but it can also have nice fall color. It's a woodland understory plant that can also grow in full sun. It will spread and can cover a large area fairly quickly.</p>
	<p>Maiden Silvergrass [<i>Miscanthus sinensis</i> cv.]</p> <p>Several varieties of <i>Miscanthus</i> are available. All prefer full sun and decent soil. The foliage persists through the winter in varying shades of brown.</p>

Mark Turner is the photographer and co-author of several plant field guides (all from Timber Press):



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