

“Difficult” Plants

BENEFICIAL LANDSCAPES

“If every plant and flower were found in all places, the charm of locality would not exist. Everything varies, and that gives the interest.” Richard Jefferies

Karma Larsen

There’s no doubt about it, there are some difficult ornamental plants out there. Usually we’re referring to plants that are hard to get established, too tall, short-lived or difficult to control. Sometimes the difficulty is the site itself, which may have poor soil or other problems. Thankfully, some of the most difficult plants have characteristics that make them perfect in just the right—or most difficult—spot.

Difficult to get established—ultimately long-lived

Surprisingly or not, some of the longest-lived garden plants are actually the slowest to get established. Plants with deep roots, like prairie plants, may not look like much in garden centers early in spring, and may not look great the first year or two they’re in the ground, but in many cases they’re delaying top growth in favor of developing root systems that will serve them well in the long run.

By definition, a perennial is a plant that lives for more than two or three years. Some of the slower-developing perennials, however, can survive a decade or more. Woodier prairie natives like leadplant, *Baptisia* and New Jersey tea may remain hidden for years and ultimately outlive everything around them. Other long-lived plants that are somewhat slow to develop include balloon flower, bee balm, culver’s root, queen of the meadow, skullcap, *Campanula*, evening primrose, hardy geranium, toad lily and Lenten rose.

Too tall—dramatic focal point

Plants can vary greatly in height due to site, soil, exposure and other factors, but the plants listed below are likely to grow higher than 3 feet. The best thing you can do for them is to place them in community with plants that can help hold them up and hide their “bare legs.” Grasses, in particular, tend to have sturdy basal foliage that works well at the base of tall perennials. “Too tall” perennials include: milkweed, coneflower, red hot poker, blazing star, prairie coneflower, meadow rue and wild senna. And, though we might prefer them to remain shorter, their height is no accident—they’re simply reaching for sunlight and attracting pollinators.

Hard to control—may work well in tough spots like rain gardens or curbsides

For many homeowners, curbside strips of soil surrounded by hardscape or buildings are the toughest spots to work with. They’re difficult to mow, difficult to water without runoff, sometimes they’re shaded part of the day and exposed to harsh sunlight later on. Often they have to withstand foot traffic, pet refuse and salt from snow removal.

A few groundcovers worth trying are wild strawberry; prairie smoke; ajuga; snow-in-summer; plumbago; lamb’s ears; bloody cranesbill; and *Corydalis*. Specifically for salt-tolerance, consider candytuft, sedum, coral bells, hosta and artemisia.

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CUTLINE: Some species of blazing star or *Liatris* can grow very tall and hang over sidewalks or other hardscaping, but they also create dramatic focal points and attract a wealth of pollinators.