

Serendipity in the Garden

BENEFICIAL LANDSCAPES

Karma Larsen

If having control of your landscape is a thing you want (or have—is that possible?), this article probably isn’t for you. But if, like many of us, you’ve given up on control and simply enjoy whatever blossoms come your way, here’s a few plants that offer serendipity through the seasons.

There are many woodland “ephemerals” that return every year but come and go in spring, and are often forgotten in dormant months. Virginia bluebells offer soft blue flowers in shady areas, then die back to the ground to wait for another year. Trilliums, Jack-in-the-pulpit and bloodroot do much the same. Thankfully they tend to grow in the same tree-shaded, out-of-the-way spots as plants like hostas, plumbago and others that are slower to emerge.

In summer, there are lots of reseeding annuals that can be mixed in with other plants for mid-summer color and variety. Unlike most annuals they don’t have to be bought or planted every year, which is great, but to reduce over-abundance with some of these plants, be prepared to deadhead them—or cut them while blooming to enjoy indoors. Their roots are less dense than perennials so they won’t out-compete them for root space and most of them can be easily pulled. Cosmos, bachelor’s button, annual larkspur, moss rose, cleome, love-in-a-mist and purple hyacinth bean are just a few self-seeding annuals that will spread themselves around.

One of the tiniest reseeders is Dahlberg daisy; it grows only about 6 inches high. The foliage is delicate and fernlike and it produces an abundance of tiny yellow daisy-like flowers all summer. It will spread its tiny progeny around the garden but won’t take up space and will tuck itself in among bigger plants.

Tall vervain, as its name implies, can grow to 3 foot high or higher. It’s an annual in Nebraska that can show up in surprising places. It never outcompetes other plants, though, and is fine even at the front of a low border since it’s a “see-through” plant with a minimum of foliage at its base and small flowers at the tips of its thin stems.

None of these plants are entirely reliable one year to another, but they’re generous in not requiring effort or expense to brighten our landscape beds.

The surprise or resurrection lily is a plant that seems far more serendipitous than it actually is. Big, straplike leaves emerge in spring, then die back and are gone long before the Amaryllis-like flower stalks emerge and bloom in late summer. It’s a wonderful long-lived bulb that spreads and naturalizes to create little clumps of late summer color in the garden with no effort other than initially planting the bulbs.

Perfect planning can result in amazing beauty in the garden. But with so many variables over which we have minimal control—weather, time, energy—it’s wonderful to have plants that appear almost effortlessly and magically.



PHOTO: Surprise lily is a bulb in the Amaryllis family with early spring foliage that disappears long before the flower stem shoots up and blooms in late summer.