

The Obsessive-Compulsive Gardener

Featuring Lenora's Favorite *Self-Sowing Friends*.

Many gardeners are so perverse. They hate successful plants and prefer coddling reluctant ornamentals. Not me. When I see: "self-sowing thug" in the plant description, I know I've found another good friend. Most people equate flowers with garden beauty, so if blooms are your goal ("BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND"! My favorite Stephen Covey quote), you could buy flowers from catalogs and/or garden centers. Or, do it the old-fashioned way: **Let plants plant themselves.**

My many flower beds are ablaze with color from April to mid-November. Yes, shrubs, bulbs and perennials provide structure and some color, but flamboyant annuals are the main features. Who has the time to plant all those flowers? Certainly not me, but through the years I have discovered the answer: select those flowers that eagerly volunteer to plant themselves.

These **fragrant** annual flowers cast their seeds to the winds each fall. Over the winter, the seeds nestle into the soil and erupt in spring; part of the fun is to observe where each flower thinks it will be happy. To initiate this cycle, you will have to plant the first year. Thereafter, just hand-shred fall's dead plants and leave as mulch. You could also save seeds to start some indoors for an early jump on the season. I never do this since I HATE starting seeds indoors, too tedious.

Except that I am always on the look-out for new flowers to invite to my garden party, I never again would have to buy or plant and would still have my glorious gardens every year. BUT, this is not "low-maintenance gardening" because serious weeding is necessary to edit and control the overly enthusiastic. After the initial spring weeding to select and thin, heavy mulching will prevent a new round of volunteers. Round-up™ can be used for paths, driveways and edges. The key is to recognize the seedlings as they come up; you may wish to photograph, draw and/or describe each of the seedlings as it comes up so that next year you don't accidentally extirpate a friend.

These selections are proven winners in my zone 6 drought-prone garden with cruel summer and winter winds and heavy clay soil. All prefer full sun; however as noted, several are very flexible in their tolerance of low light conditions. (These are also the most invasive. This is not a coincidence). Most are appreciated by butterflies for the nectar. Please, no insecticides, except for the most dire situations. Like flea beetles.

Most of my selections are common, well-known flowers. However, the garden centers are usually selling hybrids which may sacrifice nectar and fragrance for larger flowers. Many of these hybrids are sterile, which means no self-sowing. They are also useless for the pollinators. You might as well plant plastic flowers from Hobby-Lobby. The old fashioned flowers are not as spectacular, but make up for it in self-sowing ease and nectar for thirsty butterflies. My favorites are Cosmos, Marigolds and Zinnias—Z. elegans, Z. tenuifolia and Z. angustifolia. In my garden the nectar rich hybrid 'Profusion' Zinnias also self-sow.

Most of these seeds are available from the Seed Savers Exchange in Decorah, IA (563-382-5990 www.seedsavers.org). The catalog also has photographs, or you can enter the botanical (Latin) name in www.google.com search box to view pictures and further descriptions. The following descriptions are beloved plants less-well-known, but indispensable to this busy gardener.

Vine Petunias

Petunia multiflora sp.

Best in full sun, vine petunias will grow in shade and will tolerate both soil extremes— heavy clay to sand. They can be used as a ground cover (spreads 36" X~18" tall) or you can encourage the vines to climb up taller plants and trellises. The white, pink, lavender or purple flowered plants make a spectacular, shimmering display from spring to hard frost. The seeds can be started indoors or spread directly on the surface of the soil (Don't cover. They need light to germinate). The seedlings are very small, bright green, slightly fuzzy rosettes. The flowers emit an intense perfume in the evening to attract Hummingbird Moths. This, my most treasured flower, tolerates heat, rain or cold and enthusiastically self-sows all season-long. Dead-heading is not necessary, but you may have to watch for & hand-pick Tobacco Bud Worms—the only issue with this most excellent plant.

Flowering Tobacco

Nicotiana alata and N. sylvestris

"Nickies" tolerate any soil and any light conditions. The *alata's* bright green plants grow 2–3 feet tall with evening-fragrant flowers in many shades, including white, pink, lavender, red and chartreuse. *N. sylvestris* ("Only the Lonely") is 4-5 feet tall with intensely fragrant white flowers. The seedlings are flat, fuzzy bright green rosettes (similar to vine petunias; however the petunias quickly grow bushy while the nickie remains a rosette until it erects the flower spikes). It is a favorite food source of hummingbird moth caterpillars—do not kill those huge green caterpillars with the tail-horn! (Some of us pet them affectionately). You will be rewarded by evening visitations of the striped hummingbird moths hovering over the flowers with their 8" long tongues.

Cleome (Spider Flower)

Cleome spinosa

Another amazing specimen, these heat and drought tolerant flowers grow 5 feet tall in a sunny garden, topped by large airy clusters of blooms in shades of white, pink, rose or lavender. (Hint: train vine petunias to grow up the spiny naked stems). This is also an excellent flower for bouquets. The seedling has medium green tri-part leaves. Early spring, be on the lookout for flea beetle infestations. Actually, they can be an ally to control the over-enthusiasm of Cleome seedlings.

Verbena-on-a-stick

Verbena bonariensis

A tender perennial, this zone 7 self-sowing beauty often survives mild Kansas winters. Full sun and well-draining soil are its only requirements since it is drought tolerant. The lavender flowers bloom from late May to mid-November, dancing in the wind 2 to 4 feet above the basal rosette. Its delectable nectar attracts squadrons of pollinators, making it a 'must-have' for the pollinator garden.

Hyacinth Bean

Dolichos lablab

The purple stemmed vine climbs about 6 feet, or it can be allowed to sprawl. The vine is very attractive with tri-fold leaves that are burgundy underneath and burgundy stems. The flowers are a pretty plum and lavender combination; however, the fall-display of brilliant fuchsia bean pods is the attraction. To plant, wait until the soil warms up and first soak the beans overnight before planting about 1/2" deep and keep moist until the distinctive purple-green seedling emerges. The young bean pods are reportedly poisonous, but you'll prefer to leave them for their beauty anyway.

Four O'Clocks

Mirabilis jalapa

This two-foot tall shrubby plant tolerates any soil and any light conditions. The jasmine-scented flowers open in the late afternoon and close the next morning. The flowers come in a wide range of shades—fuchsia, coral, white, yellow, and even mottled/striped! And do not kill the large green tail-horned caterpillars—they grow up to be the White-lined Sphinx Moth, a Hummingbird Moth species. The avian hummingbirds and the moths duel over the blooms. (Moths win!)

Four O'clocks are zone 7 perennials so the thick tap root may survive a mild Kansas winter. You'll also have multitudes of seedlings because the seeds are poisonous to birds. The seedling has very recognizable large cotyledons and the foliage is bright green. In early spring, a small leaf maggot may infest the buds and skeletonize the leaves. Hand-killing is best, but you may need to spray—wincing in pain at the thought of endangering caterpillars, but the rapacious maggots prevent flowering and can even kill the plant.

Mexican Sunflower

Tithonia rotundifolia

A 6 foot branching plant with fiery-orange 3" flowers, *Tithonia* belongs at the back of every sunny garden. The flowers are on long stems that make for excellent bouquets. Yes, all the other flowers in this collection are pink-purple colors. But I control the drama

of a violent color-clash by plantings of gray foliated perennials: Russian sage (*Perovskia atriplicifolia*) and *Artemesia* –any and all species, especially ‘Powis Castle’).

Castor Bean

Ricinus communis

This lushly tropical plant has many cultivars, providing many choices: huge, palmate leaves of green, blue-green, bronze, or burgundy and flowers of red, orange or pink and size from 4 foot “dwarves” to 18 feet tall. The plants and seeds are deadly poisonous -- the source of the neurotoxin, ricin, which was used by terrorists in the Japanese subway several years ago. Do not plant where grazing animals or pets might snack. Pink, plastic flamingos are an attractive addition to any *Ricinus* planting.

Red Perilla

Perilla frutescens

Red Perilla is also known as ‘Japanese Red Shiso’, a culinary herb used in oriental cooking, especially sushi. It has the red-purple foliage and growth habit of ‘purple ruffles’ basil with similar lavender flowers. Perilla is so indefatigable in its self-sowing that some may consider it an objectionable “garden thug,” but it is outstanding when mixed with silver-leafed plants. We fearless (or maybe it’s ‘tasteless’) gardeners like it next to Tithonia and all the other brilliant reds, yellows and oranges as a bridge to the purple-pinks.

Cockscomb

Celosia cristata

Just in case we don’t yet have enough color in the garden! This old-fashioned Celosia has flowers that look like giant fuchsia cauliflowers erupting from the top and smaller side plumes. The intense color grants forgiveness for having no fragrance, but small pollinators like bees, skippers and flower moths visit for nectar. The seedlings have bright green leaves with orange stems, or brilliant burgundy stems & leaves (my favorites), so they are easy to recognize and transplant to any formerly quiet space in the garden.

Bronze Fennel

***Foeniculum vulgare* ‘Smoky’**

A perennial, ‘smoky’ has beautiful dull bronze foliage, growing to 6 feet tall in full sun. The new growth is the color and appearance of a fox squirrel’s tail and the flowers are sulfur-yellow. The fragrant foliage is edible, but too strong for my taste buds. However, the caterpillars of Eastern Swallowtail find it delectable. (Don’t kill those striped, orange-horned critters! Grow for both you and the caterpillars). You can tell its self-sown seedlings from Dill and Common Fennel by the smoky gray-brown color.

For that partially-shaded spot

Balsam “Touch-Me-Not”

Impatiens balsamina

Like *Impatiens* (a fellow-member of the *Balsamina* genus) Balsam prefer partial sun to partial shade but will grow in full sun if sited in moist fertile soil. Unlike *Impatiens*, they grow 12-18” high and vigorously self-sow. They also tolerate our summer heat and wind much better than *Impatiens*. The 1” camellia-look-alike blooms are arranged along a stalk, with a wonderful choice of colors: coral, pale pink, lavender or fuchsia. They bloom for only about six weeks, but self-seeding plus deliberate successive hand-sowing will guarantee these bright spots of color from early spring to frost. They also grow well in containers. And if you wonder why “Touch-Me-Not”, grab a fresh seed pod. It explodes in your hand, hurling seeds everywhere.