

# Stillingfleet

Vanessa Cook of Stillingfleet picks out the plants which will keep your garden colourful well into autumn

One of the ways that a good garden becomes a great garden is through prolonging the plant interest, not only by the colour of autumn foliage but by the planting of late-flowering plants. I visited a garden in Shropshire (Wollerton Old Hall) that does this unbelievably well. Large Salvia and Dahlia plants are kept over winter in heated polytunnels until they are needed to fill gaps where earlier flowering plants had finished and been cut down. Most of us have do not have the facilities to do this but it is worth looking at plants that are easy to keep from year to year to fulfil the same task. Keeping the garden alive until the frosts is something we can all aim for – after all we often have wonderful Indian summers and who wants a dead-looking garden when it is still warm enough to sit outside?

I have several Salvias that I keep in the frost-free greenhouse to use for exactly this purpose. Salvia confertiflora is wonderful, 6ft tall with upright stems clothed with large textured leaves and terminal spikes of soft, fuzzy scarlet flowers. This makes an almost subtropical statement and I mix it with Dahlia coccinea. Grown from seed, the single flowers range from pale orange to scarlet and make decent-sized plants in a year. Salvia curviflora is not quite so eye-catching and is certainly not hardy so needs either to be grown in a pot or dug up at the end of the season to protect it from frost. It is very pretty with upright growth ending in tubular fuchsia-pink flowers.

Salvia involucrata is one of my favourites, especially as this is hardy here in a well-drained sunny border. However, it takes time to grow to flowering size in the border and I keep plants in the greenhouse so I have flowering size plants by July. The rosy-pink flowers are large and eye-catching and at 5ft tall it is ideal to fill a gap. Another Salvia that survives outside is Salvia guaranitica, with large indigo-blue flowers and at 5ft it is a good size in the border. Both these are tall vigorous forms and flower until the frosts or I feel it is time to dig them up and bring them inside for the winter. All Salvias are easy from cuttings taken in July/August, they root quickly and smaller plants may mean you have more room in your greenhouse to grow even more. They are plants you may become addicted to!

We also grow Salvia 'Wendy's wish' which is rather an untidy grower. Only 3ft tall, it is a mass of purplish red flowers and the stems and leaves are marked with maroon, making an interesting clump of flowers and foliage. This year we have a new variety to us, it is Salvia 'amistad' which has pale, yellowish green leaves and deep purple flowers with black calyces. It is said to grow to 4ft but although it has been in the border since May it is still only 2ft tall. It may be the lack of rain has not helped but the flower colour makes it well worth growing. I will take cuttings as I am not sure how hardy it will be with us.

We also grow several low growing shrubby Salvias. These seem to survive in the well drained parts of the garden with ease and start flowering in May. Evergreen foliage and very pretty flowers make them useful at the front of the borders. Try Salvia 'Christine Yeo' with pretty lavender flowers or Salvia 'red bumble' with scarlet flowers, both are no more than 2ft tall.

As well as the Salvias we keep Dahlias in large pots to fill gaps in the late summer border. I especially like Dahlia 'Twynning's after eight'. This has nearly black foliage and single white flowers – even if you do not like Dahlias you will like this one. We also grow Dahlia 'honka' which has narrow yellow petals making it look rather spidery, both are easy to grow. Dahlia merkii is a species of dahlia that I grow from seed and it has survived in the garden over several winters without any protection. The flowers are small, single and a soft mauve, it has the added attraction of very pretty finely cut foliage and makes a clump up to 4ft tall. I personally like the single forms best; they are good for bees, producing nectar and pollen when it is in short supply, and suit my type of gardening better than the blousy doubles.

So prepare your garden for an Indian summer and have it full of colour until the frosts.

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