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Taste and Colour in the Rock Garden

By J. ARCHIBALD

MANY GARDENERS are apt to be complacent and quite satisfied with their achievements, if they have succeeded in growing a diversity of plants fairly well, but to me it seems a pity and, to say the least, rather inadequate if the plants which they have grown are not shown off to their best advantage. In the rock garden particularly a greater number of plants must exist in closer proximity than anywhere else in the garden and the gardener must show himself to be an artist if a planting is to be successful. Rock garden planning differs from, say, the planning of a shrub border, in that, while cultural considerations come first in both cases, form, outline and leafage are to be regarded with less importance than the colour of the flowers. Nevertheless, natural combinations of plants, such as carpeters over bulbs and the under-planting of shrubs can often be exploited; for instance the blue of muscari piercing a pink mat of *Phlox subulata* "Appleblossom," in addition to looking well, is culturally suitable. The position should be chosen first then to suit requirements of culture and, if the worst comes to the worst, the subject placed adjacent to plants which will be out of flower when it blooms; however, if any nearby plants do flower at a similar time and are of a colour which will probably not blend or contrast, a new site must be looked for. Of course, many of the most striking colour combinations are accidental, but conversely two colours which clash will be a source of disappointment and annoyance for years, especially if the plants are difficult to grow or move.

An unexpected discord of tones is usually struck by two plants of a similar hue flowering close together at the same time. An excellent, albeit extremely regrettable, example was a slide, shown at a recent meeting, of a remarkably well-grown specimen of *Douglasia vitaliana* alongside some *Narcissus bulbocodium*, whose clear Portuguese sunshine had made the yellow of the former look quite mustardy. In the same way, when two blues flower together, the purple in the duller one is always accentuated. All this does not mean to say that a planned

association of shades will invariably be a success : on the contrary, many well thought out contrasts absolutely misfire often through failure of the flowering seasons to overlap, but there are a few fairly reliable criteria which may help in displaying a plant or preferably group of plants well. In the following paragraphs the examples given and the conclusions drawn from them certainly do not guarantee success but they have been effective in some gardens.

Blue and pink is usually a fairly reliable association, particularly if the blue is a pale one. The azure showers of *Omphalodes cappadocica* with the soft rose of *Saxifraga umbrosa primuloides* are delicately lovely in light, cool shade and again *Chionodoxa luciliae* in soft blue is delightful among the feet of carmine and cream-headed *Tulipa kaufmanniana* "The First." The complementary colours of blue and yellow are also an almost certainly successful contrast and never fail to emphasise each other's purity. I planted a sweep of *Scilla siberica*'s gentian-blue under the branches of the brilliant variety of *Forsythia intermedia* "Lynwood," and a startling blue and gold splash resulted ; however, the brightness might have been too much if it had not been for the softening effect of several plants of the common primrose flowering nearby and among some of the scillas. These three plants provide a good example of satisfying both cultural and aesthetic requirements at once ; the forsythia, not a fastidious plant, gives a little shade to both the other subjects, while all three flower at the same time. Another easy and pleasant harmony of blue and yellow for those rock-gardeners who are not too fussy and strict can be obtained by sowing the two Californian, sun-loving annuals, *Lupinus nanus* and *Eschscholtzia californica*, near each other. The blue and white of the little lupin with the pale gold of the poppy could not be bettered. Similarly an equally good and less obtrusive couple of Californians are Baby Blue Eyes, *Nemophila menziesii insignis*, and Cream Cups, *Platystemon californicus*.

Bright reds are not common among alpenes and are also rather difficult to place. Whereas blue and yellow, the two complementary colours, associate well, the complement of red is green. Consequently, reds frequently show up best against a dark emerald background, therefore plants with handsome foliage such as ferns and many of the taller *Ericaceae* can be made use of, as long as they do not flower at the same time and they like the same conditions. Bright blue sometimes goes well with red and I recollect reading of the two delphiniums, fluttering gentian-blue *D. tatsienense* and scarlet *D. nudicaule*, associating well together. Reginald Farrer mentioned a fine natural combination in "The English Rock Garden" on similar lines : electric blue *Aquilegia reuteri* (syn. *A. bertolonii*) covering the ground between the sealing-wax red Turk's caps of *Lilium pomponium*, both being backed and shaded by dark, little *Pinus montana*. If a companion cannot be found for a bright red or any other dazzling bloom, one can do no better than use a dark or silver-leaved shrub as a background.

The use of silver leaves or white flowers is always effective and is excellent for tempering garish colours. Bright *Crocus* species present

a good appearance when pushing their sparkling goblets through the silver quilt of *Antennaria dioica rosea*, in full spring sunshine. White and pale yellow flowers can give the same result ; for instance, the hard yet lovely tones of aubrieta can be modified by planting with pale *Alyssum saxatile citrinum* (not the type) or even biscuit-beige *A.s.* "Dudley Neville" in a limey, sunny place. A. T. Johnson, who always had a fine eye for colour, recommended placing the burnished scarlet of tall *Lilium chalcedonicum* against "the cool slate-green and white of *Senecio monroi*."

The last combination gives rise to the fact that many associations of plants not only give pleasure to the onlooker but are essential to the health of the subjects. Lilies in particular must have ground-cover to protect the young shoots, so, plant the more slender lilies like *L. cernuum* and *L. concolor* among heaths and dwarf rhododendrons ; *L. rubellum* and the *Nomochares* are especially fit for growing among gaultherias, rhododendrons and allied plants in sandy peat or leaf-mould ; *L. maculatum alutaceum* with its apricot-orange cups would, I think, look well in front of the bronze-purple foliage of plump, little *Berberis thunbergii atropurpurea nana* and, as both plants are easily accommodated, do well in full sun.

Orange and purple provide one of the most arresting contrasts possible and their effectiveness together can be illustrated by looking at an individual flower-head of *Aster forrestii* where the brilliant violet rays stand out from the orange disc so strikingly. *Primula bulleyana*, with its buff flowers from deep-orange buds, would provide a fine backcloth for the royal purple spikes of *Orchis foliosa*, if the latter were readily available, but one catalogue mentions *Iris* "Mandarin Purple" as an apparently good substitute and these plants all do well in a similar damp position. I should rather like to try the brown-orange flowers of six-inch *Mimulus burnattii* as a ground-cover for the filigree foliage and airy, lilac sprays of *Thalictrum chelidonii* growing in cool, moist, half-shade, but this is only an imaginative prospect.

A group of plants "gleaming in purple and gold" like Byron's Assyrian cohorts cannot fail to catch the eye ; a clump of the deep-purple shaggy heads of *Phyteuma scheuchzeri* on their one-foot stems backed by a cascade of bright yellow *Genista pilosa procumbens*. Then, some yellow can be brought into a planting of purplish heaths by using shrubs like *Potentilla fruticosa*, *Rosa spinosissima lutea* and hypericums. Species of the last like *H. polyphyllum*, *H. coris* and *H. balearicum* are effective, putting out their golden salvers beside *Erica cinerea purpurea* and its like.

Up till now I have not mentioned magenta, as flowers of this colour seem to occupy a special place in the gardener's mind and have a rather unjust stigma attached to them. Magenta is in fact no more difficult to locate than any other shade as long as one isolates it from other colours and situates it adjacent to white flowers or silver foliage. In such circumstances the crudeness of magenta is modified and it becomes quite a telling hue. Occasionally the very harshness of the

colour itself can be exploited, rather than avoided, by planting with flowers of bright purple or deep red. One such association is that of the two larger geranium species, *G. ibericum* and *G. psilostemon* (syn. *G. armenum*), where the former's brilliant violet-purple is explosive with the vivid magenta of the black-eyed gipsy from Armenia. *Phlox subulata* "Temiscaming" in violent magenta-red can be planted by more daring gardeners along with deep-purple *Aubrieta* "Gurgedyke," or, as a later-flowering variety is preferable, with *A.* "Mrs. Rodewald's" red-velvet wallflowers, when both plants will burst into flower with a clash of Oriental cymbals.

Briefly, now, I shall attempt to illustrate the process that should be gone through in choosing a companion for a plant, using, in this instance, well-known *Gentiana sino-ornata*, with its sumptuous, rich blue trumpets. Culturally, the gentian must have a moist, acid soil with a fair amount of sun and its flowering period is spread over the late summer and autumn. Luckily, there are numerous fine subjects blooming at the same time and the choice is really a personal one. The bright, clear gold goblets of that fine Mediterranean bulb, *Sternbergia lutea*, are especially good and, in pink, the undulating carpet of Himalayan *Polygonum vacciniifolium* are excellent, although I have found that, if planted too nearby, the polygonum's rampant habit might swamp the gentian. The fiery red-hot pokers of little orange-coloured *Kniphofia galpinii* are splendid companions, but I feel the South African would be happier in a hotter, drier place. A background of foliage, such as provided by *Calluna vulgaris cuprea*, just beginning to melt its summer-gold into the copper and bronze of winter, leads to my final selection. Ultimately, then, I think that the autumn tints of the two North American shrubs, *Vaccinium stamineum* and *V. caespitosum*, along with some scattered corms of *Cyclamen neapolitanum*, with their rich-pink, reflexed flowers and intricately patterned leaves, would be a good choice to grace the autumnal beauty of *Gentiana sino-ornata*.

On reading over the preceding paragraphs, I realise that I have listed quite a number of possible colour schemes using, however, only the more usual colours and, for the most part, easily grown plants. Nevertheless, it is these plants which must be responsible for providing the basic colour constituents for rock-garden planning, as the average gardener is never going to be able to provide a mass of colour with species like *Boykinia jamesii* or *Primula sonchifolia*, exquisite as their tones may be. It is to the latter group of plants that the gardener must look when it comes to providing interest and exercising horticultural skill, no less important considerations than taste and colour but perhaps easier to satisfy, initially, at any rate.