



Goth Gardening Anyone?

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Tis the witching season – while we might only meet revelers dressed in black witch costumes this month, there actually are a number of plants with black flowers or foliage that can be grown all season long in your gardens. There probably is not a true black flower as plants don't produce black pigments naturally. That being said, some plants have such dark burgundy, maroon, blue, red or purple coloration that they really look black.

This dark coloration is due to a pigment in the plant known as anthocyanin. While the pigment, chlorophyll absorbs all colors of the light spectrum derived from sunlight, anthocyanin only absorbs yellow or green wavelengths. These give leaves or flowers their dark colors. When growing black foliage or flowering plants keep in mind that dark colors absorb more heat and may need extra watering during hot, sunny weather. Also, colors are affected by temperatures as well as soil pH and may vary in some plants as these environmental factors change.

My favorite black flowering plant is a black petunia. I don't remember if I picked up 'Black Magic' or 'Black Velvet' but first found this spellbinding plant at the Asparagus Festival in West Brookfield, MA a few years ago. The large 3-to-4-inch blossoms will continue throughout the summer if the plant is deadheaded and regularly fertilized. Pair it with 'Angel Wings', a silver senecio (member of dusty miller family) and a trailing blue lobelia for an outstanding container display.



Image by dmp2023

Black hollyhocks are another great plant especially when you're looking for that sentinel or punctuation point in the landscape. They really give off the best aura when set against a light-colored backdrop like a house, fence or shed. I have only grown 'Blacknight' but 'Nigra' and 'Jet Black' have similar descriptions and growth habits. All have deep, deep purple single blooms on five foot or more long stems. Let some seeds form and drop to the ground as these magnificent plants are typically biennial or short-lived perennials but readily self-seed.

Like the look of a black mulch but don't want to buy and spread more every year? Try black mondo grass as a slow-spreading, low-growing groundcover. This clump-forming grass only reaches 5 to 6 inches tall, likes sunny sites and produces small white to mauve flowers followed by shiny dark blue berries.

The variety of leaf shades in coral bells (*Heuchera*) had exploded over the last decade or so. While many gardeners are enamored with the luscious caramel and chartreuse shades, others chose the dark side of the genus. Cultivars like 'Plum Pudding' and 'Black Pearl' dazzle with their dark, deeply colored leaves. Coral bells tolerate sun to part shade and spew out long stems of white to pinkish flowers much to the delight of hummingbirds.

Hellebores have also seen their popularity rise and this is likely due to many new cultivars introduced in recent years. While nothing compares to the white Christmas rose for me, others swoon at more recent introductions including those on the dark side. The black Lenten rose is an early spring blooming perennial, sometimes opening its buds in March depending on the weather. Shades of darkness may vary somewhat so try to purchase this long-lived perennial in bloom. Cultivars to check out include 'Blue Lady', 'Black Beauty', 'Garden Black' and 'Dark and Handsome'.

I grow several varieties of Siberian iris but I've never found the black iris (*Iris chrysographes*) sold locally and it always seems to be sold out when I get to my catalog orders. The purplish black flowers are said to emit a sweet scent. They are also reputed to be tough plants, native to China and Myanmar and able to survive in tough desert climates.

For years I had a Harrison's yellow rose growing up a trellis next to the cellar door. My best pairing with it was a variety of black tulips, probably 'Queen of the Night' but there are a few other black tulips cultivars on the market. One I would like to try is the black parrot tulip with its deepest purple feather petals some with green streaks in the middle.

If Goth gardening appeals to you, many other dark plants may fit into your design scheme. Think of 'Black Barlow' columbine, 'Black Magic' tender Colocasia, 'Black Peony' poppy, 'Black Prince' snapdragon plus many dark-leaved sedums.

Some believe a true black rose 'Halfeti' resides in southern Turkey. This dark red rose is said to turn black during their summer months. While we can't reproduce the soil and temperature conditions in this part of the world, there are several nearly black roses that will grow here

including 'Almost Black', 'Black Magic' and 'Black Baccaro'. Like many roses, the temperatures affect final blossom coloration so some years or seasons the blossoms may be darker than others.

If you find black in the garden bewitches you, try out some of these or many other selections of black foliage or flowering plants. Embrace the dark side of plants to enhance your garden designs or make the statement you envision. For more information on growing specific dark plant species or any other gardening question, call the UConn Home and Garden Education Center, toll-free, at (877) 486-4274 or visit us at www.homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu or your local Cooperative Extension Center.