

Graham's greens *Graham Cousins*

The colour green has the ability to calm. It is what makes our countryside so peaceful. Why then, do gardeners increasingly ignore this wonderful asset and stuff their gardens full of plants with gold, purple and variegated-leaved plants? Do they no longer value tranquility as a garden quality? Too often it seems, green leaves are dismissed as 'boring' and regarded as second best.

The problem is that many variegated and coloured leaved plants are, as individuals, undeniably very beautiful. One has only to think of the variegated form of the Wedding Cake Tree (*Cornus controversa* 'Variegata') to see the truth of this. Coloured leaved plants look so striking, so distinctive, in the garden centre. And keen gardeners know that foliage is important. So, faced with these beauties, the impulse to buy is irresistible. What follows is, all too often, gardens overflowing with coloured leaved plants of gold, grey, purple, black, brown, red and, most noticeably, variegated plants - spots, splodges, stripes, margins and mottling in gold, white and pink. All this profusion of leaf colour must then compete visually with garden flowers and, in the process, the flowers are robbed of their starring role providing colour highlights in the garden. Contrast the hectic results of this style of planting with the calm of the countryside, of a Cornish valley garden, or of a Japanese temple garden, and you begin to see what we have lost in having our love affair with coloured leaves.

A further problem caused by the use of coloured leaves is the impact these intrusive colours have on the larger landscape. This is particularly true of rural situations but even in suburbia, the effects can be grievous. Too many village streets are disfigured by out-of-character plants such as golden conifers. And most suburban roads are scarred by the clash of gold variegated leaves with pink brick.

It is not my purpose to argue that all gardens should be green leaf only. For a start, there is a natural and entirely healthy normal colour range in plant foliage that can be utilised in gardens and be harmo-

nious, when rightly sited. Blue and grey leaves belong to hot, dry, sunny gardens, marbled leaves to shaded settings. Seasonal colours also make a contribution: consider the pinks and plums of spring foliage and the glorious reds and yellows of autumn. These colours mark the passage of the seasons: mingle them with year round coloured leaved plants and the seasonal drama is sadly diminished.



And many gardeners would not wish to be entirely deprived of variegated plants. For them, the wise words of Edwin Lutyens should be taken very much to heart. He said that garden artists need 'discretion' and 'reserve'. This is true for all garden planting. True, with knobs on, for coloured leaved plants.

Despite these considerations, it is worth stating, at a time when coloured leaved gardens are the norm, that a thoughtfully planted green leaf garden can be every bit as interesting as its coloured leaved counterpart. The difference is, and this is the important bit, the garden will have an extra dimension - a tranquil atmosphere not present in its coloured leaved rivals. I should add that my personal choice has been for a green leaf garden and visitors do remark on the tranquility of it, without necessarily recognising the cause of the calm.

My aim in this article is to urge gardeners to think again about the virtues of green leaves: not to see them as second best but to explore the many shades of green, to appreciate shape and texture of leaves as well as colour, to give garden flowers, those ephemeral beauties that give gardens their dynamism and help us keep in touch with the rhythms of nature, the verdant setting they need to give their best.

Gardeners are constantly being urged to make their gardens more wildlife friendly and rightly so. Should they not also be urged to make gardens more people friendly by making their gardens oases of green amongst all the concrete and steel of modern Britain?

*Graham's garden is at Orchards, Hall Lane, Walton, Lutterworth, Leicestershire.
Open for the National Gardens Scheme on 7th & 10th June.*