

# The Best Plants You're Not Using

BY JESSIE ATCHISON

**S**omething's missing from your landscape plantings, and you might not even know it. While the main focus of sports facilities is often on turf, the areas surrounding playing fields are important, too. Flowerbeds make the facility seem special, more colorful, more welcoming, more upscale, and a more pleasant place to spend time. While common plants like impatiens, petunias and geraniums can always be relied upon to provide high-impact color in these settings, there are many more unique plants available that can really set landscape plantings apart. The best part is that an exotic look doesn't have to mean more work for maintenance crews. Here are some exceptional, easy-care plants that you may not be using, but should consider trying.

## Foliage

Not all plants need flowers to get attention. Colorful, eye-catching annual foliage is a major trend in horticulture right now. Used as an accent for flower-filled landscape beds or containers or even planted as a focal point, great foliage plants can make a big statement, with the added bonus that "deadheading" is not required.

Altermanthera (*A. dentata*) is a striking foliage plant with a tropical look. Purple Knight is a relatively new variety in this species with deep purple to almost black foliage and an upright, spreading habit. It works well in mixed containers, where the plants will arch dramatically over the edges of the pot, and it's stunning in mass plantings. In landscape beds, each plant grows 16 to 20 in. tall and spreads up to 3 ft., almost forming a shrub of dark leaves. Purple Knight performs well in full sun to light shade; the foliage is darkest in full sun.

Dichondra is a high-impact, long-performance trailing plant that works well in hanging baskets or containers, or even as an attractive annual groundcover. Two varieties, Silver Falls (*D. argentea*) and Emerald Falls (*D. repens*), offer excellent color and texture. Silver Falls is distinguished by rounded, fan-shaped, fuzzy silver foliage on silver stems. It trails or spreads 3 to 4 ft. long in a single season. Emerald Falls has a slightly different, more rounded leaf shape and creates denser, tighter plants. It grows fuller than Silver Falls but not quite as long, trailing about 3 ft. and adding subtle green color to plantings. Both varieties grow about 2 in. tall in landscape beds, forming a lush carpet of foliage, and both are very heat and drought tolerant.



Plant in full sun to partial shade.

Ornamental Millet is a showy, people-pleasing version of an avian favorite; birds love the fluffy seed plumes. Purple Majesty (*Pennisetum glaucum*) is a breeding breakthrough that won the prestigious All-America Selections Gold Medal for its outstanding garden performance. It grows 3 to 5 ft. tall in the landscape, where it makes an excellent backdrop for lower-growing varieties. The plants begin green, but turn a deep mahogany-purple as they mature outside in full sun. To achieve the most impact, plants should still be green and not yet have seed plumes when they are installed. Because Purple Majesty is a hybrid, it will not re-seed in the landscape.

## Flowers

Of course, there's nothing quite like a bed of beautiful blooms to spice up a landscape. Angelonia is great for adding height to beds and borders, growing 18 to 24 in. tall. The AngelMist series (*A. angustifolia*) grows tall spires, each covered with small, snapdragon-like blooms. Available in several colors (including shades of deep plum, purple and lavender to white and pink), AngelMist thrives in a wide range of environmental conditions, making it a versatile addition to almost any landscape. Plant in full sun for best results.

Begonias have been popular in landscapes for years, but there's a next generation alternative to the standard, upright fibrous or "wax" begonias commonly plant-





ed. For a truly different and eye-catching look, Dragon Wing and BabyWing begonias (*B. x hybrida*) do the trick in full to partial shade. These "angelwing" types have large, broad leaves and lots of blooms on huge plants. Dragon Wing displays clusters of pendulous blooms in red or pink and grows about 15 in. tall and 18 in. wide. BabyWing is a little more upright, with light pink flowers. These unique varieties are extremely durable, very heat tolerant and perform well in cool conditions, too. And they deliver excellent season-long performance with very low maintenance required.

Dahlias can be challenging to use in the landscape, but the Melody series (*D. hybrida*) has strong, sturdy stems and great garden vigor that make it an excellent bedding or container plant. Large, fully double, long-lasting flowers cover each plant, and the very dark green foliage provides high-impact contrast. Melody varieties come in 6 showy colors, from bright yellow to unique bicolors, like pink and yellow or lavender and white combinations. They grow 18 to 24 in. tall in full sun.

For something really different, try annual gaillardia. The Torch series has excellent heat tolerance. In moderate climates, it will bloom year-round. Each plant is very free flowering, with lots of large blooms. The rich colors available in the series (Yellow, Flame and Red Ember, which is a bold mahogany-red) also make it an ideal choice for autumn displays. In landscapes and containers, Torch gaillardia will reach a height of 14 to 18 in. and spread about 14 to 16 in.

Impatiens are a common sight in many shaded landscape beds, but have you ever tried trailing impatiens? The Fanfare series (*I. hybrida*) is a one-of-a-kind collection; the plants' unique mounding, trailing habit allows them to spread much more vigorously in the landscape than standard impatiens, meaning you'll need to use fewer plants for a lush, flower-filled show. Fanfare varieties fill in extremely fast and are exceptionally heat tolerant, so they look better longer in plantings. Available in Fuchsia, Orange, Lavender or Blush, Fanfare trailing impatiens grow 18 to 20 in. tall and spread about 18 to 24 in.

Lantana is often used in Southern gardens, but plant breeders have infinitely improved these common plants and created varieties that are much better suited to commercial landscape use. For faster fill-in and stronger plant vigor, it's time to abandon the "old guard" and choose varieties that are meant to be landscape lovers. The Landmark series (*L. camara*) was specifically bred for landscapes, with a controlled, mounded habit and vigorous growth. Each plant grows 15 to 20 in. tall and

spreads up to an amazing 2 ft. Free flowering, with an abundance of vibrant, bright blooms in several colors, Landmark lantana is at home in full sun landscapes. While its exceptional heat and drought tolerance make it an easy choice for dry Southern plantings, it also performs well in Northern conditions. **ST**

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