

Cultivating Drama in the Garden

I've been cultivating some drama... in the garden. Wait—this is sounding like that game in which you end everything with “between the sheets.” I've been cultivating some drama... between the sheets! Okay, okay. This is a gardening column. Let's keep it in the garden, shall we?

The drama all began when I squinted at my garden. All I could see was a big mess of green. Green, green and more green. There was no shape or form, nor elements to stop the eye, no punctuation. That's when I knew I needed more drama—plants to help break up the monotony of green and to give pause, to emphasize their neighboring plants and to punctuate that sea of green.

I began to think of drama in the garden primarily through black flowering plants or black foliage. Thus began the two years of goth planting in the garden. And you know what? It's paid off. Black tulips nod their forlorn heads in the spring, and they may as well have The Smiths playing as a constant soundtrack. Black foliage from a variety of plants brings the needed drama during spring, summer and fall. Here are some of my favorites.

Let's begin with some black flowers...

Tulips: Queen of Night and Black Parrot provide drama in the tulip department. I like the intrigue they bring, unexpected



THE SASSY GARDENER

by LeAnn Locher

in the tenderness of spring, in a typically pastel time.

Chocolate cosmo: *Cosmos atrosanguineus* is an herbaceous perennial with a uniquely scented dark maroon/black flower that, yes, truly smells like chocolate.

Akebia quinata is also known as chocolate vine, not because the flowers smell like chocolate, but because they are a deep chocolate brown/black color. This sweet vine grows happily in the garden, either trained up an arbor or scrambling around and among other plants.

Dark foliage pumps up the volume, ranging from black to plum to chocolate.

Sambucus Black Beauty, a dark-leaved elderberry, is my current favorite. Copied to the ground in early spring, it barrels through the season bringing new



Sambucus Black Beauty provides the perfect backdrop for society garlic.

black sprays of foliage. In years when I've not cut it to the ground, it develops darling pink blooms that when backed with the black foliage, really do stop you in your tracks. It's currently providing the dramatic black background for the purple flowering orbs of society garlic. Its cousin, *Sambucus Black Lace*, has finely cut foliage, more reminiscent of lace and a Japanese maple. If only I had room for another.

Purple smoke bush, *cotinus coggygria*, is grown for its blackish foliage more than its smoky flower plume. I'm patiently training mine, but by fronting it with the lime green glow of spirea “magic carpet” it's at the center of our garden drama.

Black mondo grass, *ophiopogon planiscapus* “Nigrescens,” is a true black leaf in the garden.

When paired with an underplanting of a neon green sedum, black mondo grass can easily look like giant black spiders crawling through your garden. If that's not drama, I don't know what is.

Purple pineapple lily, *eucomia comosa* “Oakhurst,” is another point of lovely dark drama when paired with a neon green sedum.

Black elephant ears, *colocasia esculenta*, is a classic for back patio pots. Underplant them with a dripping, golden creeping jenny and you take the drama quotient up a notch. ☘

LeAnn Locher is cultivating drama in her North Portland garden but would love to visit and write about yours. Do you have a garden she should see? Email her at sassygardener@gmail.com or visit her online at lelonpo.com.



L to R: Black Parrot tulips. Queen of Night tulip. Purple Smoke Bush



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