



My Blue Heaven

As I've mentioned before, just prior to moving to Haddam I visited Spain, queen of courtyards and courtyard gardens. I was enthralled with the exquisite walled gardens of the Alhambra, with its long reflecting pools. And so, as my own courtyard was taking shape, I dreamt of installing a similar pool down its length. But that seemed overkill, considering I already had a large pond in the back, not to mention that it would have been rather pricey. There would be water, yes—every Spanish or Moorish garden has water as its centerpiece—but only the small round pool with Raphael's fountain and a collection of variously-sized frogs.

Perhaps mimic the effect with a long block of low blue flowers? The idea was considered, but rejected: I like too many flowers to want to give over such a large area to just one variety. Still, I wanted a cool, calming effect, so I keep adding blue flowers to the mix. I love the bright summer colors of marigolds, zinnias, and dahlias, but they can flourish out back around the vegetable garden, not here. Here, there will only be whites, pastels, and as much blue as I can grow.

But as any gardener will tell you, there is color in a painter's palette and then there is color in the garden world, where nearly every "blue" flower is actually some shade of purple. Science: the pigments that produce true blue, called anthocyanins, are quite rare. Blue's short wavelengths are as attractive to bees and pollinators as they are to us, and give a needed boost to plants growing in subpar conditions.

Few of the treasured blues are native. In fact, in my garden, I know of only one: *Camassia scilloides*, the wild hyacinth. There are many varieties of camassia, mostly originating out west; this is the only one native to the northeast. It was a valued food source for Native Americans, yet deer are indifferent—perfect! Perennial great blue lobelia is native, but its blue tilts toward purple; annual lobelia is true blue, but not native. Can't have both, I guess.

So I'm growing non-natives, but either avoiding or staying vigilant over potentially invasive choices. There are some charming volunteer forget-me-nots next to the front steps; in the marshy soil around the pond, they would crowd out everything else, but up here I think I can keep them in check. The star-shaped vivid borage flowers brighten May, then seed themselves everywhere in the beds, so I dig them out by the dozens every spring. They're excellent for pollinators and I really should move some to

the vegetable garden. Iris come in every shade of blue and will multiply into thick clumps, but they're easy enough to chop out, so they can stay. I only have a few, anyway: the short bloom season doesn't seem to justify the quantities of foliage involved. Intensely blue gentians, only a few inches tall, bloom late in the season.

For summer there are annual cornflowers and their perennial cousin, the mountain bluet (*Centaurea Montana*). They, along with scabiosa, offer fringed flowerheads dancing on long stems. In bouquets they offer a striking contrast to the hot colors of summer annuals, on the opposite side of the color wheel. Just for fun, I grow globe thistle. It grows four feet high and produces spiky orbs which, of late, are all too reminiscent of the Covid-19 virus. The spikes attract pollinators but deter deer, which is always a winning combination. Easy-growing sages come in every shade of blue, some purplish, some not, and will rebloom if you shear the plant after it flowers.

The standout blue, of course, is the hydrangea. To my mind, this is just about the biggest bang for your buck you can plant. Hydrangeas are easy to grow, can be chosen or pruned to a size that suits your space, and produce masses of clear blue flowers that last for months. Our Connecticut soil is naturally on the acidic side, which is ideal for maintaining the bluest color, but if yours isn't acidic enough, it's easy to amend. On the other hand, a handful of lime will nudge the flowers toward purple or pink. Your choice, but since blue is so rare, I can't see any advantage to messing with it. If you want a pink hydrangea, just buy one that's pink to begin with.

Will my courtyard ever be blue enough? This list seems to provide plenty of choices, but the different bloom times are scattered throughout the summer, so the blue never entirely takes the lead. New plants will be added, and the older ones will multiply, but that's just as true of the other plants—soft pink phlox, fresh white cosmos, creamy clematis. As with so much else, the mix in the garden may never equal the perfection in my head, but it will please me none the less for that.