



## **Go Big or Go Home**

Your garden is color-coordinated, planned for successive bloom, meticulously weeded...and, maybe, just a tiny bit boring? There's no drama, not enough contrast, nothing to intrigue adults or teach children how much fun they can have in the garden. One easy solution is to add oversized plants to your yard.

The largest members of the horticultural world tend to come from hot, humid climates, which naturally force-feed their spectacular growth. The very large-leaved ones are usually competing for sunlight, and since those big leaves are constantly losing moisture through transpiration, they need dependable sources of water coming in. They will grow very quickly: some "Gigantea" elephant ears, which easily reach ten feet in height in their native tropics, grew five feet last summer next to my pond, with leaves big enough to serve as umbrellas. Gaudy cannas also reached five or six feet by midsummer, though their leaves 'only' measured about fifteen inches. And the very aptly named "Monstera," grown in a pot and moved indoors for the winter, will scrape the ceiling before long, with platter-sized swiss-cheese leaves.

Less exotic, but winter-hardy, are hostas. Usually we see them in moderately-sized clumps, but some of the biggest varieties can get three to four feet tall and up to seven or eight feet wide. Hybridizers allowed themselves to get a little silly when choosing names for the big guys, but "Bigfoot" and "Humpback Whale" are, indeed, effective at conveying the size of these varieties. They and "Empress Wu," generally considered the largest, will become focal points of your shade garden, *if* you can fend off deer and slugs. And one single oversized leaf will add drama to any floral arrangement.

Add some punch to neat rows of vegetables with some prehistoric-looking rhubarb. Its red stems and crinkly (and toxic, due to high levels of oxalic

acid) leaves spread up to three feet, promising lots of old-fashioned desserts (while the leaves are poisonous, the stems are not). A distant relative, gunnera, grows ten feet tall with leaves four feet across. Alas, this stunning Brazilian native is too cold-tender for Connecticut.

Punctuate kitchen garden beds further with cardoons. These attention-grabbing members of the artichoke family stand five feet tall and four feet wide, with bright purple thistle-like flowers and jagged silver-green leaves. Native to the Mediterranean, they are considered invasive in warmer states, but our winters are still too cold for them to pose a threat here. Unlike regular artichokes, it is the stalks, not the flower heads, that are eaten. I'm planting some this year for the first time.

You can add the gracefulness of tall grasses without resorting to the familiar, pretty, but non-native pampas grass. Home-grown varieties include switchgrass, five feet tall with striking fall colors; Indian grass, a six-footer; and big bluestem, tallest of the group with clumps eight feet tall and two feet wide. Birds and other wildlife will thank you for the seeds any of these will produce.

**Big flowers:** Dinnerplate dahlias can measure ten or eleven inches across, though they won't usually get quite that large unless you're rigorous about disbudding (removing the tiny buds to either side of the central flower), rich soil, and consistent watering. There's no denying the impact of one huge flower in a centerpiece. Even the mid-size varieties, with flowers six inches across, are big enough to have an impact from across the yard. Plan to buy some at our big spring plant sale, which will be held this year on May 7, in time for Mother's Day and spring planting.

Old-timey hollyhocks easily produce spikes up to seven feet high, adorned with brightly-colored flowers that open from bottom to top. They bloom in midsummer, but if you cut off the spent stalk and feed them, you often get a second bloom. My favorites are sold as "Outhouse hollyhocks." Supposedly, they were strategically planted so that ladies with delicate Victorian sensibilities could see them across the yard, sparing them the

need to ask the whereabouts of the privy. The story may or may not be true, but the flowers are cottage-garden classics.

For truly astonishing growth in a single season, plant sunflowers. One chunky seed can grow ten or even fifteen feet in a single season, with a huge flower held atop a sturdy stalk thicker than a walking stick. Here again, seed companies came up with fanciful names—try ‘Kong’ or ‘Sunzilla’ as well as the old standard ‘Russian Mammoth.’ Nothing will appeal more to children, especially if you plant the seeds in a circle and loosely tie the stems together, creating a sunflower playhouse.

There is, of course, special pathos in planting sunflowers this year, because they are the national flower of Ukraine. Millions of acres of the Ukrainian plains are planted in sunflowers, and in recent years the country has been the world’s largest exporter of sunflower oil. This year, of course, will be very different; you cannot plant seeds under fire. Sunflowers in our gardens here don’t help Ukraine’s plight, but they do remind us how lucky we are to have the freedom to grow our gardens, and our lives, as we choose.