

Winning Plant Combination: p-harmony.com

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How do you know which plants to throw together? Is there some sort of Proper Pairing of Plants Formula? This is an issue garden writers must face constantly, as I have seen more and more articles telling me how to create the perfect combination of plants in my garden. Is this like the e-harmony.com of gardening? Do the plants actually have 29 qualities upon which I need to base their matchmaking? I'm not going for the mating factor, of course ... just a happy marriage that (trendy garden lingo warning) "pops."

Personally speaking, I don't use any particular formula for marrying plants. Okay, maybe I do, but it changes with my moods as well as the setting. When I bring home a new potential garden suitor I plop it in many places, paying close attention to water, soil, and light requirements, hoping for that instant WOW I get when I know ... these plants will get along just fine and look fantastic doing it. The new-kid-in-the-bed doesn't get permanent digs until it chimes harmoniously with its soon-to-be bedmates.

An area in the garden that can be easily overlooked (quite literally) for creatively uniting flora is the low-level landscape. Ironically enough, it seems like one of the easiest plant pairings to make. It's kind of like the Las Vegas drive-thru wedding chapel of the garden, really.

Quickie marriages can be more easily dug (and un-dug) here than most anywhere else in the garden. However, if you're talking about making the romance sing even in the depths of wintertime, the matchmaking gets a bit more difficult, but definitely not impossible.

One wintry ground-hugging combination I have fallen in love with in our garden consists of four somewhat unlikely lovebirds ... uh, I mean plants. Hey, I never said it was a monogamous marriage! This gorgeous group starts with Pyramidal Bugleweed, *Ajuga pyramidalis* 'Metallica Crispa'. I know, I know ... Bugleweed doesn't bloom in winter. I'm a foliage person when it comes to this particular clump-forming rhizomatous groundcover. Where else in the garden is there an evergreen spreader with those sexy tight cushions of crinkled 4-inch-long obovate, leathery dark purple leaves like this bugleweed? And yes, I said sexy! Growing to about 6 inches tall, this guy is easy-going. He lives in sunny or shady conditions. The only thing he likes is a bit of moisture, although he's neither too picky about that, nor about soil type. And you have to love a groundcover that can take our clay soil.

It's hard to say no to adding the prostrate, stem-rooting arms of Golden Creeping Jenny, *Lysimachia nummularia* 'Aurea'. With her evergreen, light-textured and bright chartreuse rounded 3/4-inch button-like leaves, she wants you to believe she's coy, but she's really suffering a bit from A.D.D. Given a good amount of moisture, she doesn't stay focused on one area very long before she's stretching her roving and loud yellow-green arms onto the next. (Thank goodness her bed-hopping behavior is easily disciplined.) Oddly, everything I just stated is what makes her so appealing to me in this grasshopper's knee-high landscape setting. And much like her bugleweed bedmate, she thrives in sun or shade, and in most any kind of soil.

The p-harmony keeps on humming when Dwarf Mondo Grass, *Ophiopogon japonica* 'Nana', steps onto the scene. This form of Mondo grass, although tuberous-rooted and rhizomatous, is a non-invasive clump-former. As a matter of fact, this fellow is a bit on the slower-growing side, so I'm thinking he's not afraid of commitment. He is the evergreen engineer of this combination, keeping his sensible dark green 2-inch-tall, narrow and rigid, grass-like foliage crew-cut neat and tidy. He's not flashy; he is calm and reasonable. (It must be the *japonica* in him.) Again, like his mates, he is not too picky about light, requiring anything from part shade to full sun. What a guy! He tolerates most any soil conditions, but prefers a more fertile, well-drained soil.

So far, we have a grouping of sexy, loud, and logical ... dark purple, yellow-green and dark green ... oblong leathery, button-like and uniformly spiky. What's missing? What does this marriage need in order to "pop?"

To complete the love nest, we need to call in the 'Oh Johnny' girl, Lamb's Ears, *Stachys byzantina*. She's the foil the other three needs to be their best. Normally considered a perennial, this 8-12-inch-tall rhizomatous and stoloniferous mat-forming groundcover is beautifully evergreen in our garden, producing dense soft rosettes of oblong-elliptical silvery,

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thick, wrinkled, fuzzy leaves to 4 inches long. One word to the wise: put this gal on the drier side of the marriage, as she responds negatively to wet feet. Other than that, she's great with the clay soil, in sun or shade. She is so lovable you just can't help but bend down and stroke her soft aromatic leaves. Deliciously yummy to the eye and the touch, this girl creates the final tier of p-harmony needed for this Fantastic Foursome.

And there you have it: the dark purple metallic leaves of Bugleweed underlain with the semi-fluorescent gold coin leaves of Creeping Jenny, mixed with the dark green crew-cut of the Dwarf Mondo Grass, all backed by the sprawling silvery gentleness of the Lamb's Ears. I don't think we covered 29 qualities, but the result is nothing short of true love. This is a union made in winter garden heaven. (Let no hoe put asunder.) Happy matchmaking! *AS*



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