

A Shady-Sturdy Winning Plant Combination Iris, Hosta, Carex, Aster and Elephant Ears

Pam Crown

Master Gardeners are skilled at creating beauty with plant combinations. In the fall, however, Piedmont gardeners get discouraged with the state of their shade gardens. Plants are tired and so are gardeners. Heat and drought have beaten us down and our precious plants are looking ragged. As for flowers . . . *fugetaboutit!*

The plant combination I offer will keep your shade garden full of interest, texture, and color well into fall without the need for flowers. These plants can be combined in multiple ways. All are grown more for their foliage than their flowers. Leaves are the workhorses of the plant world and the gardener desiring long term interest will seek out plants that provide sturdy leaves of different colors, shapes, textures and size.

All these plants will prosper with much less than full sun; however, these plants are not for deep shade. None are as water-wise as your favorite cactus, but they are not horribly thirsty either. All will multiply and grow into nice clumps if planted in decent soil and kept from being totally parched for weeks on end. As your clumps proliferate, these leafy neighbors will interact and make combination on their own.

Leaves are the workhorses of the plant world and the gardener desiring long term interest will seek out plants that provide sturdy leaves of different colors, shapes, textures and size.

Now, not in any particular order, meet the neighbors....

Blue Flag, *Iris versicolor* has long, 30-inch, strappy leaves with a base of dark purple. In spring this native has dark-to-light purple flowers on delicate stems. Although often described as liking moist sites, it does not appear to falter during our hot dry summers. The one-inch wide grey-green leaves stay vertical and provide a skyward thrust to the garden. *I. versicolor* is thought of as a shallow water plant that needs sun. In my dry garden it prospers in part shade. Who knew?

Hosta 'Golden Tiara' is a reliable garden workhorse. Its small rounded leaves are light green edged with chartreuse. As it edges borders, fills in spaces and expands neatly to form weed-defying mounds, *Hosta* 'Golden Tiara' earns its keep. If it is used to under plant the taller offerings of this combo, it will provide a steady source of color.

Carex dolichustachya 'Gold Fountains', adds both color and a new shape to this garden combination. This plant slowly spreads, forming a thick mat of yellow narrow grassy leaves twelve inches high. It plays off the color of *H. 'Golden Tiara'*, making *I. versicolor* leaves appear like tall green sabers.

Now we introduce another native, *Aster divaricatus*. It spreads slowly to form a low-growing mat of dark green heart-shaped leaves. The bonus tiny white starry flowers bloom in late summer or early fall while the dark green leaves persist through the winter. *I. versicolor* is happy growing up through this Aster's rich green leaves.

You remember the class clown who was always getting attention? In every group there is a showoff. In this combination you have *Colocasia 'Illustris'*, known as Elephant Ears. This plant sends up three-foot tall thick stalks topped by bold black leaves with bright green veins. These velvety leaves can be twelve inches across and cause any combination to pop. They grow from large bulbs which will multiply and make a generous clump in a few years. If the clump gets too large, you can easily move some of the bulbs to another part of your garden that needs pizzazz. *Colocasias* do need some moisture to keep their leaves looking fresh.

The above combination would create a lively shade garden, but for a truly eye-popping combination, throw in one annual. Its only vice is taxonomists cannot decide what to call it: *Coleus X hybridus* 'Solar Sunrise' or *Solenostemon* 'Solar Sunrise'. Whatever you call it, this medium-large (as large as six inches across) leafed coleus can take sun to part shade. If pinched back in the spring and kept relatively well watered, it will form a two-foot tall multi-branched plant with rich green, yellow and burgundy marbled leaves. IMHO (in my humble opinion), 'Solar Sunrise' is perhaps the very best coleus bred so far

So there you have it—a shade garden that has height, color variation, appealing textures and the stamina to get through a Charlotte summer. If these plants can make it, so can you! PC

Pam Crown is an Extension Master Gardener Volunteer with Mecklenburg County, NC.