

Truly Compelling Combinations
Creating Sizzle and Subtlety
Prepared for the Northwest Flower and Garden Show
February 7, 2018, 3:00 PM, Hood Room
by Brenda C. Adams

Why focus on combinations when designing your gardens?

Combination planting is the art of arranging plants in pairings or groupings in which each plant compliments another so that the ensemble is much more beautiful and impactful than any of the individual elements. Simply stated, the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts!

What makes a combination work?

The inherent tension between contrast and repetition makes a combination compelling. Combinations can be formed with any mix of plants – trees, shrubs, herbaceous perennials, grasses, ferns, annuals, or bulbs. Wonderful arrangements can also be created using only one category of plant. The options are endless.

What are the tools at your disposal?

Look at all aspects of each plant including its flowers, buds, foliage, bark, stems, seedpods, berries, and fruit, as well as how these might change throughout the seasons. You might also include garden art, structures, or containers in your combinations.

What qualities should you feature in creating your combinations?

In analyzing the plants you might want to include, consider the qualities of texture, shape, dimension, color, structure, form, and architecture. Texture refers to either tactile or visual “feel”. For example, some foliage will be truly soft and fuzzy to the *touch* while shiny, reflective foliage might *look* smooth and silky. The leaves, flowers, berries, or other plant elements may have distinctive shapes you can utilize in your designs. The dimension of an element and how it compares to another in the combination can set up a powerful contrast or be used repetitively. Color may be found in any aspect of each plant, not merely in its flowers. Not only is color a useful tool to repeat or contrast, but the intensity or saturation of color as well as whether it is cool or warm can play a vital role in making memorable combinations. The structure, form or architecture of a plant can also be used as a repeating theme or a contrasting element.

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What are the roles of repetition and contrast?

Repetition is a unifying tool which infuses a combination with a strong *raison d'être*. Carried to the next level, repetition of a combination, color, or form throughout a garden will also unify the landscape. Contrast, on the other hand, is used to add zest and excitement. How you balance these two will determine the kind of overall impact your combinations will impart.

How do you create more sizzle?

For more sizzle and excitement, emphasize contrast by increasing the use of contrasting elements and by increasing the degree of contrast. Hot, saturated and complimentary colors increase sizzle. So do strongly architectural plants. Truly compelling sizzling combinations will also include some repetition as a unifying force.

What if you prefer a more subtle or elegant look?

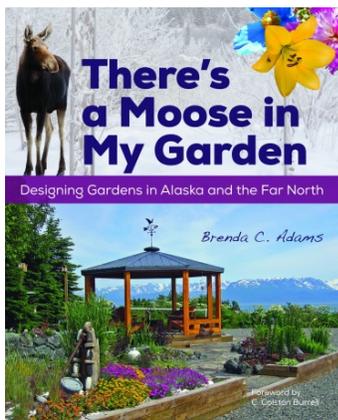
To create more subtle and soothing combinations do the opposite. Emphasize repetition and increase its use. While still including some contrast to give the combinations pizzazz, the differences will be more understated, less dramatic, and more nuanced. Pastels, cool, and analogous colors produce more subtle results. A very special case is monochromatic combinations in which there is total unity of color.

Can you combine these concepts?

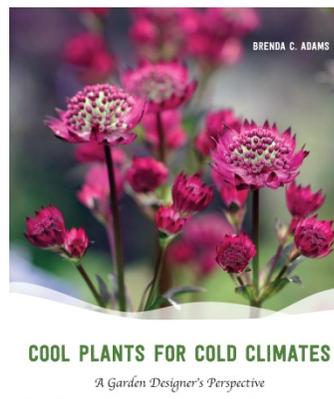
Combining sizzle and subtlety – in other words using a lot of repetition and a lot of contrast – will lead to stunning, deeply interesting, and all around, great combinations.

For more design ideas and practical advice join me at the book signing for your copy of

There's a Moose in My Garden



Cool Plants for Cold Climates



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