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Hellebores in the author's April garden

21 Dependable Plants that Earn their Keep

By Cathy Slavin

My garden consists of a number of stalwart no-fuss plants, around which I indulge my “plant collector” alter ego. These plants provide reliable performance, are (mostly) unbothered by pests and help create repetition and continuity in a garden filled with mis-matched plants that I simply “had to have.” Here are some favorites.

Shrubs

I grow many types/varieties of hydrangeas. These shrubs (and a vine) provide a long season of interest with flowers lasting weeks or even months and, though they lose their leaves in winter,

they provide structure in the winter garden. They are mostly unbothered by insects and rodents and rabbits don't like them either.

Evergreens are the bones of the garden, providing interest year round. Broadleaf evergreen shrubs that I've planted repeatedly in the garden include rhododendrons, leucothoe, hollies and pieris. I love boxwood, too, and have many but I can't claim they are pest-free. Favorite conifers include dwarf Alberta Spruce (how can you not love a plant that forms a perfect cone shape with minimal to no pruning?), yew for the shady areas and some junipers to provide that icy touch of blue-green.

Bulbs

In my garden, the creatures get more enjoyment from some bulbs than I do, but there are a few bulbs I wouldn't want to be without. Snowdrops are the earliest reminder that spring is coming. leucojum (also called summer snowflake) is a taller bulb that resembles snowdrops but blooms later in spring and dances in our ever-present breeze. My garden also wouldn't be complete without alliums and daffodils. Unbothered by animals, these provide valuable early to mid-spring color.

Perennials

For late winter/spring interest, hellebores are sturdy and carefree plants—I have creamy whites, pinks and burgundy so dark they look black.

There are so many diverse varieties of hosta that you could build a whole garden with them! They provide season long color with their green, chartreuse and blue foliage and contrast beautifully with finer foliage. All that and they flower, too! Be sure to protect them from rabbits when the young tender leaves are emerging!

Another reliable perennial is sedum. I love them all from the tiny little creeping stonecrops to the 18-24 inch tall garden sedums (recently reclassified as genus Hylotelephium). They look spectacular all season. They form perfect structural mounds and provide color in late summer when other plants may be fading. Leave the flower stalks up in winter and they'll appear crystalline in the frost and look great capped with snow. They are unfussy, drought-tolerant and don't like to be fertilized--so easy!

Catmint (Nepeta) is another reliable performer, both in sun and part shade. Mine blooms in late spring/early summer and if you shear back the flowers after they are spent it reblooms! What to pair with them? Peonies are also extremely reliable and live for decades. Though they don't flower for long, they are worth their garden space when they are in their glory!

A tall favorite is agastache. Available in multiple colors, they have a wonderfully long bloom season from mid-summer right up to frost. The blue varieties in my garden come back each year more reliably than their reputation as short-lived perennials would suggest.

Candytuft (Iberis) provides a wonderful spring show, dotted along the front of a garden bed and their dark green foliage maintains a presence all year long. Also low growing, coral bells (Heucheras), though a little less winter-reliable, provide spring through fall foliage color in the garden, some even persisting into winter.

There's a tendency to undervalue plants that demand less effort but these plants are gems and deserve a place in the garden.