



# Garden Tips

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## Star Performers in the Garden – 2011 Perennials

**Introduction:** The *Star Performers* series offers a quick look at a few plant species and selections that showed excellent performance throughout the growing season. Gardeners should understand that these evaluations are based only on the season indicated. Long-term evaluation is the subject of other *Garden Tip* publications.

**Weather:** 2011 began in difficult style. The winter offered unusual conditions including two stretches of more than 15 days below the freezing mark and higher than normal rainfall. The frozen and saturated soil conditions resulted in higher than normal loss of herbaceous perennials. The low recorded temperature was -2F, a temperature that occurred on three occasions. The spring bloom season was unseasonably wet and cool, followed in mid-May by a drastic change to very warm (mid to high 90s) and high humidity. This caused significant leaf drop and widespread foliar/stem diseases such as anthracnose and similar. The summer and fall saw fairly typical temperature and precipitation.

### The Plants . . .

- *Amsonia hubrichtii* (Arkansas Blue Star): This southeast North American native is a dry, sunny-site standout. Subtle soft blue spring flowers are born atop a 3' tall mass of spectacularly fine-textured foliage that turns brilliant yellow in fall. The ferny mound moves gracefully in any light breeze adding wonderful motion to the garden.\*\*\*
- *Carex* 'Treasure Island': There are just so many ornamental sedges out there, how does one pick a single standout? 'Treasure Island' is an excellent selection for creating a bright spot in a shady garden. Growing to only 6-8" tall, its broad leaves are striped with white, and given reasonable moisture through the summer, stay in excellent shape right up until frost. This is not one of the overly aggressive sedges you may have grown in the past. It pairs nicely with bold hostas and *Rohdea* in any shady garden.
- *Chrysanthemum* 'Hillside Sheffield Pink': Never thought we'd be recommending a garden mum on one of these sheets, but 'Hillside Sheffield Pink' has been nothing short of an absolute standout the last two years. Plants grow to about 18" in height and make a soft and delicate mound of foliage topped by light pink flowers. This is a far cry from the tight, fussy little gum drop mums usually sold in the fall. This is a first-rate garden plant that makes an excellent addition to any garden. Best in full sun to part shade.

- *Nepeta ×faassenii* ‘Walker’s Low’ (Cat Mint): This flower machine is by far the best of the cat mints. In full sun and well-drained soil, the gray-green foliage is covered in early summer with soft lavender/blue flowers. With a light shearing after flowering, it re-blooms nicely a second time.\*\*\*
- *Rohdea japonica* (Lily of China): For those looking for a plant that can be dropped in the ground and not fussed, this is your plant. As long as it is planted in shade, *Rohdea* plants just seem to keep going and going. Broad, glossy, strap-like leaves arch from the central crown giving the look of an extremely vigorous and evergreen daylily. Depending on the seedling, plants can top out anywhere from 8” tall to over 2’. In late spring, plants produce a short spike of creamy white flowers that don’t make much of a show, but in the fall, the spikes are covered with bright red 3/8” diameter fruits that last all winter long. Plants will flower and fruit reliably until plants get too crowded – a condition that is easily remedied with a fall division. This is a tremendously drought tolerant plant that works well in very deep shade.
- *Salvia guaranitica* ‘Black and Blue’: What a plant! This 3-4’-tall sun worshiper offers splendid blue flowers all late summer and fall. It has few pests and despite the lack of red in its flowers, it is a hummingbird magnet. Needs well drained soil for best winter survival.
- *Spigelia marilandica* (Indian Paint Brush): This Kentucky native woodland plant is as at home in the shade as it is in full sun. Checking in at 2’ tall and spreading slowly, the bright green foliage looks great all summer. Brilliant yellow-tipped red flowers cover the plant in early summer and return sporadically throughout the summer. Another hummingbird magnet.\*\*\*
- *Vernonia lettermannii*: If we have anything to do with it, this will be a Klein Award winner in the future (we’re lobbying!) Unlike its old-field cousins, the 6-8’-tall ironweeds (*Vernonia noveboracensis* and relatives), this compact, 2’ mound of fine-textured foliage is a delightfully refined plant for the sun garden. In mid-summer and through fall, plants are covered with bright purple flowers, attracting hordes of butterflies. Extremely drought tolerant, it can also handle brief flooding. . . what else can it do for your garden?! The cultivar ‘Iron Butterfly’ is an excellent selection that is becoming more widely available.

\*\*\* Theodore Klein Plant Award Winner