THE GARDENER'S COLOR WHEEL

A Guide to Planning Color in the Garden

INTRODUCING THE GARDENER'S COLOR WHEEL

As a passionate gardener and former set designer, I've found the color wheel a wonderfully helpful, entertaining device. I have used one for years to teach a workshop called ***Color for Gardeners*** at the New York Botanical Garden and to create color schemes in my own garden.

Using an artist's color wheel is fun and comes easily to gardeners. Our aims are similar, but in some ways our needs are not. For instance, gardeners don't need to know how to mix paints because nature has presented us with a vast and glorious array of pre-mixed colors. Thus, ***The Gardener's Color Wheel*** was created to display a far greater range of hues then most other color wheels. *Hue* is simply another word for color. Hereafter, the two will be used interchangeably.

Our color wheel is designed to help you plan color schemes for your garden and to choose appropriate plants from your local nursery or garden center. It is intended to be used out-of-doors and has been coated to resist moisture and fading from the sun. If you keep it clean and dry, it will serve as a useful tool for many years.

Above, classic spring contrast of Golden Star and Iris.
Right, a harmony of closely related violet and pink hues.

THE KEY TO SUCCESS: UNDERSTANDING COLOR RELATIONSHIPS

The Gardener's Color Wheel shows you how colors are related. You can see at a glance which are similar and which are different from one another. And you can read all you need to know about color theory in the short paragraph on the front of the wheel. There are only two ways to use color in the garden, *contrast* and *harmony*. Both words describe relationships between colors.

Contrast

In human relations, contrast is about difference. People who have nothing in common are often drawn to one another. Each admires qualities in the other that they do not themselves possess. A relationship based on the attraction of opposites is always interesting and exciting. The same is true of colors.

Opposites Attract. Red and green, yellow and violet, blue and orange are direct opposites on the color wheel and constitute extreme contrast. Placed side by side, they generate maximum electricity and excitement. Use the color wheel to find six other contrasting pairs. Lighter and darker versions of all these colors produce noticeable, but less intense contrast. (*see photo opposite*)

Harmony

Harmony in human affairs is achieved through agreement, closeness, and commonality.
The effect is restful and satisfying. Putting together colors, which have a hue in common and are next to each other on the color wheel, produces the same pleasing effect.

The five consecutive hues containing violet — violet-blue, blue-violet, violet, red-violet, and violet-red — guarantee a harmonious color scheme. Composed of red and blue in different proportions, all are compatible. Other congenial color families can be assembled from reds, oranges, yellows, blues, and greens.
The key is the shared coloring matter. (*see photo opposite*)

THE VOCABULARY OF COLOR

The vocabulary of color is plain English; the words are simple and most of them are already familiar.

- **Complementary Colors.** The complement of red is green, the complement of yellow is violet, and the complement of blue is orange. Complementary colors lie directly opposite each other on the color wheel and result in dramatic contrasts.
- **Analogous Colors.** Closely related hues adjacent to each other on the color wheel are described as *analogous*, which is defined in *Webster's New World Dictionary*, as "similar in some respects". Similarities among colors, such as red, orange-red, red-orange, and orange make them harmonious. All four colors contain red.
- **Pure Color.** A pure color describes any hue at full intensity (the outer ring on the color wheel).
- **Color Temperature.** Although some experts scoff at the idea of color temperature, every artist and gardener gets the message. Color temperature describes the emotional impact of a hue.
- **Warm Colors.** Reds, oranges, and yellows are the warm colors. They produce heat and excitement because they recall the heat of red-hot embers, flame, and the summer sun. The warm colors appear to advance toward the viewer.
- **Cool Colors.** Cool colors conjure up refreshing images of blue ocean waves, the restful green depths of a forest, and the bracing chill of purple mountaintops. Cool colors appear to recede from the viewer.
- **Value.** The qualities of lightness or darkness in colors are called values but you can also talk about *light* colors and *dark* colors. Yellow is the lightest; violet the darkest. All you have to do is squint at the color wheel to see that for yourself.
- **Tint, Tone, and Shade.** We borrow *tint, tone,* and *shade* from the artist's vocabulary. A *tint* is any color with white added; a *tone*, any color with gray added, and a *shade*, any color with black added.
  Tints, tones, and shades pack less punch than pure colors and can be used to harmonize extreme contrasts.
  Look for tints on the front of the color wheel; tones and shades, on the back.
- **Primary Colors.** The *primary colors* are red, yellow, and blue. Red contains no other color than red; yellow is yellow only, and likewise, blue contains only blue. But all other colors can be made from these three.
- **Secondary Colors.** The *secondary colors* — orange, green, and violet are formed by mixing two primaries. Orange is composed of red and yellow; green of yellow and blue, and violet of blue and red.
  Finally, all the in-between colors are made from different proportions of one primary and one secondary color. For example, violet-blue contains both primary blue and secondary violet.

COLOR SCHEMES FOR THE GARDEN

On ***The Gardener's Color Wheel***, you will find six foolproof color schemes for gardens or for containers. The first three combinations involve degrees of contrast; the remaining three, degrees of harmony. Turn the dial so that the arrow points to a pure color on the outer ring of the color wheel. Then, using the center diagram, choose a color scheme.

- ***Complementary*** **color schemes** are made up of any two pure hues located directly opposite each other on the color wheel, such as blue and orange; yellow and violet. These pairs produce maximum contrast. But the effect can be modified and harmonized by including tints, tones, and shades of the two colors.

- ***Split Complementary*** **schemes** involve a key color, such as yellow-green, plus the colors on either side of its complement, red, and red-violet. Below, a scheme of yellow-green, red, and violet works equally well. You can't go far wrong as long as the contrasting colors are almost opposite each other on the color wheel.

- ***Triads*** are created from three colors, equally spaced from each other on the color wheel. The primaries, pure red, yellow, and blue, with no color in common result in high contrast. But pastel versions of the same hues are harmonious because pink, pale blue, and primrose yellow all have white in them. The white element in each makes them more like each other. And likeness is the basis of harmony.

- ***Monochromatic*** **color schemes** are harmonious because they employ one color only and tints, tones, and shades of that color. The classic white garden is a perfect example of a monochromatic color scheme. A red garden is harder but an interesting challenge, using pinks and tones and shades of red.

- ***Analogous*** **color schemes** depend for their harmonious effect on the close family ties of adjacent colors. Select anywhere from two to five adjacent colors. Use the pure colors at full strength or in combination with some of their tints, tones, and shades.

- ***Analogous-complementary*** **Schemes** are fun to assemble and offer the best of both worlds, a winning combination of harmony and contrast. Choose three adjacent colors and for a stimulating accent, pick the complement of one of them.

Complementary

Split Complementary

Triad

Monochromatic

Analogous

Analogous-complementary

THE POWER OF WHITE

Technically speaking, white is not a color at all. But in the garden, it is a force to be reckoned with. White is lighter, brighter, and more riveting than any color in the rainbow. One white blossom in a colorful flower garden will draw the eye like a magnet and steal the show. So use it wisely. Contrary to conventional wisdom, white does not promote unity between clashing colors.

GREEN: KEEPER OF THE PEACE

Green is the great peacekeeper. It is nature's choice as a background color wherever there is enough rainfall. In the natural landscape colors don't clash because they are woven together by this cool, undemanding hue. Green does not call attention to itself, like the bright colors and white, nor does it vanish into the distance, like the dark blues and violets. Even the most incompatible color schemes can be harmonized by the soothing presence of green.

NEUTRAL FOLIAGE COLORS

Nature also favors low intensity tints, tones and shades of gray, gray-green, tan, brown, maroon, and ocher in the landscape. Wise gardeners do the same. To reconcile too great an extreme between colors, consider gray or gray-green or use dark red foliage colors to tone down bright reds. And where bright yellow might be too garish, try a tone of golden ocher.

THE LAST WORD

While you won't find perfect matches between all the translucent hues of nature's bounty and the opaque colors of printer's inks, ***The Gardener's Color Wheel*** shows you where all the colors belong and how they are related to one another. When it comes to using color in the garden, relationships are everything!

Power of white

Shades of green

Pure color

Tint

Tone

Shade

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sydney Eddison is the award-winning author of 6 books on gardening, the most recent being *Gardens To Go* (Bulfinch Press, 2005). She is also a frequent contributor to *Fine Gardening* and has been featured in *Martha Stewart Living*, *Country Living Gardener* and other magazines. Sydney teaches classes at the prestigious New York Botanical Garden, Bronx, New York and is a popular speaker at flower shows, conferences, and horticultural societies. Her background as a painter and scene designer has given her a special insight into the dramatic role of color in the garden. Eddison's own acclaimed Connecticut garden has been featured on "Martha Stewart Living" and "The Victory Garden".

The Color Wheel Company was founded in 1986 by Jerry Haines. His son, Ken is now the owner of the company. The company produces a number of color wheels. This is their first venture into the world of gardening. Ken Haines and Peg Welch of The Color Wheel Company worked with Sydney to develop ***The Gardener's Color Wheel***.

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RECOMMENDED READING

Eddison, Sydney *The Gardener's Palette: Creating Color in the Garden* (Contemporary Books, 2002)

Harper, Pamela *Color Echoes: Harmonizing Color in the Garden* (New York: Macmillan, 1994)

Hobhouse, Penelope *Color in Your Garden* (Little, Brown, and Company, 1985)

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