

# DESIGN & DECORATING



GAP PHOTOS

**LATE-SUMMER SAVIORS** Purple spikes of Salvia 'Ostfriesland' and the pale green blades of Miscanthus 'Morning Light' keep a garden perky and pretty through the post-bloom bust of August. Arctotis 'Flame' in the foreground, is an annual in most climates, but salvia and grasses will return perennially.

MICHELLE SLATALLA / A MATTER OF LIFE & DÉCOR



## Can You Guard Your Garden Against Murderous August?

**ON A RECENT SUNDAY** night my husband came out to the garden, where I had been working since dawn. He looked concerned.

"What are you doing?" he asked in the sort of gentle tone a staff psychiatrist might use on a patient.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" I snapped, as I savagely punched a hole in a fresh 40-pound bag of compost and started flinging fistfuls of it onto the last of the foxgloves. "I'm trying to stave off the apocalypse."

"Stave off...the apocalypse?" he asked.

That's probably too hopeful," I said, dropping to my knees. "August is coming."

August. The misery month. The fall before the fall. Curtains for calla lilies. However you want to describe it, August is a gardener's sorrow. If only the daffodil optimism of spring and the gladiolus fireworks of summer could last forever. But they won't: We're head-

ing into shorter, yet deathly hot, days. And everything in my garden already looks bruised and beaten.

"Um, we have to meet the Dorfmanns for dinner in half an hour," my husband said. "You should probably shower first."

Was there nobody who would understand the coming danger? The next day, I phoned my friend Tim Callis, a garden designer on Cape Cod, Mass., who has one of the hardest and most counterintuitive jobs in America. His clients' gardens have to peak in the heat of August because many belong to summer people who don't even see them in other months of the year.

"August can be dreadful," he agreed. "But I have come up with a plan that does work for my clients. And in one word, it's salvia."

Salvias are perennial ornamental flowering sages that can be planted as annuals in colder climates. They fill bare spots made by early-summer plants that have

died, drooped or browned, he said.

I took notes as Mr. Callis rattled off a few of his favorite salvias: *S. leucantha* 'Santa Barbara' ("a great purple"); *S. uliginosa* ("very airy, and a nice spire of pale blue flow-

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ers"); *S. 'Indigo Spires'* ("long, snaky, blue-purple spires that look fantastic with day lilies") and *Salvia. discolor* ("gray foliage, with a black flower").

"Salvias love the heat and come in every color, including yellows and oranges and all kinds of blues," Mr. Callis said.

"There are only a few days left to save gardens across the country," I reminded him, nearly whining.

At this late date, he said, gardeners should buy the biggest plants they can find and plant them en masse.

"Say you have a bed that looks terrible. Clean it up, and then to fill it, go to the garden center and get a lot of one kind of plant—it could be a salvia or a pretty perennial like *Anemone 'Honorine Jobert'* with single white flowers."

Planting a swath of a single variety will create a color-block effect. "If that was the only thing you had in August, it would still be beautiful," he said.

A bonus: This strategy can also prevent next year's August problem if you don't live in an especially cold climate. '*Honorine Jobert'* (and many varieties of salvia) will be reliably perennial where winter temperatures don't drop below -20 degrees Fahrenheit.

Mr. Callis specializes in creating a particular style of East Coast cottage garden, where untamed plants elbow each other aside for attention. But throughout the U.S., professionals designing every type of garden have their own coping mechanisms for the end of summer.

To battle Midwestern heat and humidity, garden designer Nick McCullough, in New Albany, Ohio, said he relies on container gardens in August to "put on a big show." At this point in the growing season, he recommends buying larger plants with well-established roots capable of withstanding the high temperatures: "You can buy fully grown-out hanging baskets that are already flowering and pop the plants from the basket right into a container."

Brooklyn landscape designer Brook Klausing shies away from colorful plants with short bloom seasons and instead recommends adding structure—"even a rock will help"—to draw the eye away from problem areas. A favorite trick is one he learned from his father, a lifelong gardener who lives in Lexington, Ky.: "Make a couple of sculpted mounds in a bed and plant them with one dedicated plant." He recommended Pennisetum, or fountain grass, which produces colorful plumes in late summer, and *Liriope*, whose spikes of flowers arrive at the same time.

In Portland, Ore., landscape architect Karen Ford designs low-maintenance gardens that rely more on texture and foliage than on seasonal color—and suggests planting hardy perennial grasses. "August is when they look really beautiful and are starting to turn color, a reminder of the change in season that's ahead," she said.

But the real solution, Ms. Ford said, is to evaluate and improve the overall design of a landscape so that it has integrity year-round. "You need to have the bones—the hedging, the major trees and shrubs—to hold the garden in place and make it feel grounded 12 months of the year," she said. "If those things are taken care of, August takes care of itself."

In Southern California, Los Angeles designer Lauri Kranz prepares for August ("the hardest month of the whole year," she noted grimly) by planting cherry-tomato seedlings in her clients' gardens in July.

Ms. Kranz, whose gardens mix edibles and ornamentals, said, "Cherry tomatoes can grow anywhere, even on a balcony or fire escape or the front steps outside your apartment. Just get a pot big enough to come up to your knee. Then fill it with organic soil, one basil plant, and one cherry tomato plant with a support, and you will be happy all through August."

Cherry tomatoes—there's an idea. I considered the possibilities of little dabs of color in the front garden. They'll look great next to the salvias. And then you can eat them. August is looking better.

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