

Statuesque Perennials

These stately bloomers provide dramatic contrasts and seasonal color to gardens of every size. BY C. COLSTON BURRELL



STATUESQUE PERENNIALS splash distinctive silhouettes against the sky, evoking scenes of sweeping prairies or woodland edges while providing a strong backbone for a border. They also can make traffic-stopping focal points.

The architectural forms, eye-catching colors, and exceptional textures of these drama queens always make an impact, wherever they grow. From robust and coarse to billowing and airy, these diverse plants all impart scale and proportion even to modestly sized spaces. Here are some of the best perennials for adding substance and drama to the garden.

A BEVY OF TALL BORDER BEAUTIES

White boltonia (*Boltonia asteroides*, USDA Hardiness Zones 4–8, AHS Heat Zones 9–3) in bloom looks like snow in September. A profusion of dainty, one-inch, white aster-like flowers covers its four- to six-foot-tall, upright stems throughout late summer and autumn. This delicate beauty has an airy habit so is best used in masses, contrasted with strong vertical forms. Native to eastern North America, it's easy to grow in moist to wet, humus-rich soil in full sun or light

Planted in drifts, American natives such as sweet Joe-pye weed, left, and queen-of-the-prairie, top, add drama to any garden with their stature and colorful summer flowers.

shade. 'Snowbank' blooms more profusely than the species, with slightly larger flowers.

Sweet Joe-pye weed (*Eutrochium purpureum*, Zones 3–9, 9–1) is another North American native that will grow in similar conditions to white boltonia. It reaches five to seven feet tall, bearing domed clusters of pale red-violet, vanilla-scented flowers from mid- to late summer atop purple-spotted stems that are clothed in whorls of lance-shaped, coarsely serrated leaves. A mature clump is substantial enough to serve as a specimen. In larger gardens, try planting them in drifts, contrasted with grasses and airy perennials.

The frothy pink powder puffs of queen-of-the-prairie (*Filipendula rubra*, Zones 3–9, 9–1) resemble freshly-spun cotton candy. They appear in June and last about two weeks before fading to attractive light brown seedheads. Deep green, pinnately divided leaves decrease in both size and complexity as they ascend the sturdy six- to eight-foot-tall stems. This plant looks best when arranged in scattered clumps or in broad drifts. Over time in rich, moist soil, this eastern North American native will form extensive colonies from creeping rhizomes.

Giant fleecflower, shown at right as a backdrop to false indigo, needs room to spread but is not invasive. Its creamy-white flowers bloom for a long period from late spring into summer.





This combination of 'Lemon Queen' sunflower, foreground, and giant ironweed, behind it, adds a regal color scheme to any garden.

A frothy profusion of white flowers makes giant fleecflower (*Pericaria polymorpha*, Zones 4–9, 9–4) a summer standout. A single plant makes a six-foot-tall mass with an even wider spread; grouping several in drifts magnifies the impact. Unlike other members of this genus, this species native to China and Japan is clump-forming and does not seed, so there is no need to worry about potential invasiveness.

The six- to nine-foot columns of silver plumegrass (*Saccharum alopecuroides*, Zones 6–9, 9–1) dance stiffly in the breeze above open, tufted clumps of strappy basal foliage. Open inflorescences appear in summer, then fade to dense, furry seedheads, which hold through autumn into early winter before shattering. Place it at the middle of a bed as an accent, or in broken drifts among airy giant meadow rue. Native to much of the eastern United

States, this tough, drought-tolerant grass thrives in any soil in full sun to light shade.

The airy lavender veil of giant meadow rue (*Thalictrum rochebrunianum*, Zones 4–7, 8–4) makes it a perfect see-through plant. Stems clad in lacy blue-gray foliage stand three to four feet tall with a spread of one to two feet. The clouds of flowers appear above the foliage in June, adding another couple of feet in height. Use giant meadow rue along a path or close to the front of a bed, rather than relegating it to the rear where its delicate charms may be hidden. Native to Japan, this perennial thrives in moist, rich soil in sun or part shade. 'Lavender Mist' is a large-flowered cultivar; 'Elin' grows to eight feet tall with silvery-lavender flowers.

Hailing from the eastern United States, giant ironweed (*Vernonia gigantea*, Zones 4–9, 9–3) stands heads above other late summer bloomers. Stems soar six to eight feet tall before the domed inflorescences offer tightly packed violet flowers that open in succession for several weeks. It's at its best in drifts, mixed with yellow or orange flowers to make its violet flowers pop. As flowers

fade, the rusty seedheads make a decorative addition to the autumn garden. Shorter New York ironweed (*V. noveboracensis*, Zones 4–8, 8–3), native along the East Coast from Massachusetts to Florida, is a better choice for smaller gardens and tight spaces. Both species are drought tolerant but thrive in moist to seasonally wet soil in full sun.

AMERICAN DAISY DIVAS

Several statuesque perennials feature yellow daisies over a long bloom period. American natives such as perennial sunflowers (*Helianthus* spp.), rosinweeds (*Silphium* spp.), and black-eyed Susans (*Rudbeckia* spp.) offer plenty of garden-worthy options and, as a bonus, draw birds and other wildlife.

Perennial sunflowers produce spires or open clusters of yellow blooms above medium-textured foliage in summer. Muck sunflower (*H. simulans*, Zones 6–9, 9–5) is a giant with large leaves and stalks eight to 10 feet tall, spreading four to six feet. Golden yellow flowers cover the upper third of stems in late summer and fall on this native of the Deep South.

Similar in appearance and stature is Maximilian sunflower (*H. maximiliani*,

Zones 4–9, 9–4), broadly native in North America, which bears open spires of three-inch flowers on strong stems in mid- to late summer. One of my favorite choices is 'Lemon Queen' (Zones 4–9, 9–4), a hybrid sunflower that has six-foot stems topped with domed clusters of two-inch flowers. Plants have a two- to three-foot spread. These and other perennial sunflowers are best planted in masses, combined with bright purples or cool blue tones.

More architectural but less well known than perennial sunflowers, rosinweeds provide a wealth of textural options. Their foliage is bold and the flowerheads large, some reaching four inches across. Most hold their own as specimens, but they can be used in clumps or drifts to add dramatic repeating rhythm to a long border or woodland edge. Some species reseed aggressively but deadheading can reduce the spread. (For more about aggressive spreaders, see sidebar on page 30.)

Basal leaves like giant ping-pong paddles make prairie dock (*S. terebinthinaceum*, Zones 3–9, 9–3) a stellar plant for texture and structure at the front of a bed. The wiry flower stalks rise four to eight feet above the leaves in high summer. The paired leaves



If you're looking for statuesque perennials with great wildlife value, two stellar American daisies worth growing are great coneflower, left, and prairie dock, right.



Sources

Digging Dog Nursery, Albion, CA. (707) 937-1130. www.diggingdog.com.
Forestfarm at Pacifica, Williams, OR. (541) 846-7269. www.forestfarm.com.
Ion Exchange, Harpers Ferry, IA. (319) 535-7231. www.ionxchange.com.
Mail-Order Natives, Lee, FL. (850) 973-0585. www.mailordernatives.com.
Pine Ridge Gardens, London, AR. (479) 293-4359. www.pineridgegardens.com.
Prairie Moon Nursery, Winona, MN. (866) 417-8156. www.prairiemoon.com.
Prairie Nursery, Westfield, WI. (800) 476-9453. www.prairienursery.com.

Resources

The New England Wild Flower Society Guide to Growing and Propagating Wildflowers of the United States and Canada by William Cullina. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, MA, 2000.
Sunset Western Garden Book (9th ed.) edited by Kathleen Norris Brenzel. Time Home Entertainment, Inc., New York, NY, 2012.

of cup plant (*S. perfoliatum*, Zones 3–9, 9–3) are fused at the nodes, making vessels that hold dew and rainwater. Coarse but captivating, this free seeder reaches four to eight feet in height with a three-foot spread, producing abundant clusters of three-inch flowerheads in summer. Compass plant (*S. laciniatum*, Zones 4–9, 9–4) is arguably the most dramatic, with two- to three-foot, deeply lobed, oaklike leaves near the base and coarse stalks stretching four to eight feet tall, topped by loose spikes of four-inch yellow daisies.

Though the flower color of black-eyed Susans can veer towards brazen gold, they are beloved for their floral profusion, extended bloom cycle, and wildlife value. They are dramatic when used as accents towards the front of a planting, surrounded with plants of lower stature, to accen-

tuates their height and form. The showiest of the lot is surely shiny coneflower (*R. nitida*, Zones 6–9, 9–5), whose three-foot-wide clumps of dense, self-supporting, five-foot stems boast a profusion of showy golden flowers in late summer, particularly in the selection ‘Herbstsonne’.

Green or cutleaf coneflower (*R. laciniata*, Zones 3–9, 9–3) is similar, but the yellow flowers are smaller and the decorative leaves more finely divided. Great coneflower (*R. maxima*, Zones 4–8, 8–3), the largest of the genus, excels both in foliage and flower. Blue-green, spoon-shaped leaves form dramatic basal rosettes from which the four- to seven-foot, sparsely branched bloom stalks arise, each topped with a single flower of drooping yellow rays around a pronounced conical disc.

A TROPICAL FLAIR

A few perennials with tropical tendencies add drama to the garden through both their extraordinary foliage and lovely flowers. At the top of my list is Japanese spikenard (*Aralia cordata*, Zones 4–8, 8–4), which combines tropical elegance with temperate ease. This hardy aralia has huge compound leaves with broad, luscious leaflets. The four- to six-foot stems are topped in mid- to late summer with spherical clusters of greenish white flowers followed by berrylike purple fruits relished by birds. It’s easy to grow in rich, moist soil in part shade. A selection called ‘Sun King’ adds golden foliage to the mix.

Butterfly ginger or white ginger lily (*Hedychium coronarium*, Zones 7–11, 12–7) and its hybrids are Asian relatives of culinary ginger grown for their elegant foliage and intoxicatingly fragrant flowers. The foliage makes a stunning four- to six-foot-tall vertical accent massed near rounded forms such as Joe-pye weed. The straight species is a late bloomer and often flowers in autumn just in time for frost, so you may want to choose an earlier blooming cultivar such as orange-flowered ‘Daniel Weeks’. Provide full sun in temperate regions, part shade in warmer climates, and rich, moist soil.

Scarlet rose mallow (*Hibiscus coccineus*, Zones 6–11, 12–5) is a stately giant of the Southeast, growing up to 10 feet tall and four feet wide. This goliath needs room to spread, so situate it at the rear of a deep bed. A mature plant makes a bold statement; a mass might be gilding the lily.



For exotic-looking flowers and late-summer color, it’s hard to beat scarlet rose mallow, top, or ‘Tara’, above, an orange-flowered selection of butterfly ginger.

It offers broad, deeply incised, palmately lobed leaves and stunning six-inch, saucer-shaped scarlet flowers from summer to early autumn. It thrives in wet or dry sites in full sun or light shade. New shoots emerge later than most perennials, so leave a few inches of the old stems in place to remind you it’s there.

DESIGNING WITH STATUESQUE PLANTS

Shrewd plant choice is critical for setting the proper mood and creating a harmonious landscape; consider size—both height and spread—form, texture, and phenology. Seasonal flow from foliage to flower to fruit to autumn color and winter silhouette are the hallmarks of most large perennials. Their size and stature assure staying power. The interplay of light with your plants, and their fragrance, further enhances the enjoyment of the garden. Even in autumnal senescence, bold is beautiful.

Balancing the scale of the space and the mood you wish to evoke will guide your plant choices. Some bold plants like giant fleecflower show best as specimens, with room to preen, especially in small gardens.

MORE STATUESQUE PERENNIALS

Name	Height/Spread (ft.)	Ornamental Attributes; Cultural Requirements	Origin	USDA Hardiness, AHS Heat Zones
<i>Alcea rugosa</i> (Russian hollyhock)	4–9/1½–2	Four-inch, clear yellow flowers in dense spikes in summer; good air circulation, rich, well-drained soil	Western Asia	3–8, 8–3
<i>Helianthus angustifolius</i> (Swamp sunflower)	4–5/4	Delicate, pencil-thin leaves and golden yellow summer flowers in open spires; moist loamy soil, full sun to part shade	Eastern U.S.	6–9, 9–4
<i>Kosteletzkya virginica</i> (Seashore mallow)	4/1–2	Produces prolific medium pink hibiscuslike flowers in summer; rich moist soil, salt tolerant	Eastern Seaboard	6–11, 12–6
<i>Lilium formosanum</i> (Formosan lily)	4–7/2–3	Fragrant, white trumpet-shaped flowers appear on stiff, self-supporting stems in midsummer; average to rich soil, sun or part shade	Eastern Asia	6–9, 8–1
<i>Patrinia scabiosifolia</i> (Patrinia)	4–6/1–3	Small clusters of bright yellow flowers bloom on multibranched stems in midsummer; moist, loamy soil and full sun	Eastern Asia	5–8, 8–5
<i>Rudbeckia subtomentosa</i> (Sweet black-eyed Susan)	3–5/1–2	Three-inch flowerheads with flat golden rays and dark discs form a flat to domed mass in late summer; well-drained soil, full sun to part shade	Midwest to southern U.S.	3–8, 8–1
<i>Silphium asteriscus</i> (Starry rosinweed)	3–5/1–1½	Two- to three-inch yellow daisylike flowerheads above a rosette of medium green leaves in summer; full sun to part shade, drought tolerant, attracts butterflies	Central and eastern U.S.	5–9, 9–5
<i>Silphium compositum</i> (Kidneyleaf rosinweed)	4–8/1–2	Large wavy basal leaves, stems of small yellow flowers in summer; full sun to part shade, heat and drought tolerant, good butterfly nectar plant	Southeastern U.S.	6–8, 8–6



Tall perennials with airy foliage and flowers, such as lavender-flowered giant meadow rue, can be used as “see-through” or scrim plants in the front or middle of borders.

Others, like ‘Lemon Queen’ sunflower, deliver maximum impact when massed.

A garden created exclusively of titans would be overwhelming. You need a full complement of variously-sized perennials for an effective planting. It is important to balance harmony with contrast—a dynamic tension that makes the planting more exciting. Stately plants with open structures or lacy foliage such as meadow rues and boltonias usually look best grouped with contrasting plants. Place billowing, airy plants alongside those with bolder textures to make every plant count. Add rounded forms like queen-of-the-prairie, Joe-pye, and ironweed to help ground these combinations.

Resist the temptation to relegate all statuesque plants to the back of a border. Pull a few forward to enliven the garden profile. Use those with open crowns like veils. Front and center, or towering at the back of a border, these perennials elevate gardens to exhilarating heights.

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