

Its Cooling: Get Back Outside!

My refrigerator sports a sign, “ Gardening is Cheaper than Therapy.. and you get tomatoes!” I have forgotten where it came from but it has acted as a prod and hope during our sweltering summer. It cheered me when I finally spent a few hours weeding a patch that was probably one percent of what needs doing. I was rewarded by an invasion of chiggers.

Being able to come nose to nose with what is growing is a good way to assess future projects. The lovely rhododendron I put in to replace the banana shrub that turned into a tree was eaten. When I prodded it adding mulch to the site it toppled over: the main stem gnawed to the breaking point. The ghost of the banana shrub, *Michelia figo* has a few emerging bits, either from old roots or new seeds, so there is no crisis. It is perhaps one of those compensatory aspects of aging, but I am no longer a critical gardener. There are always small joys.

One recent delight was a seedling of *Gaura* with clear pink flowers. I love the white ones: those small white angel wings that pop up in unexpected places counteract a degree of garden neglect. I hope the pink one stays. If you play around on the internet you have run across lots of lists of plants for one purpose or another. Usually they are writing about tropical plants for places that never enjoy winter. One such list incorporates flowering plants that will survive heat and drought.

The fun of watching bright and dark butterflies sporting among the wild milkweed justifies the space that native takes up, but how grand if the flowers were more vivid than dustbunnies. So it is good to learn that there is one, native to South America, *Asclepias curassavica*, the blood flower milkweed that has red, orange, and yellow flowers. Not hardy below 45 degrees it can be grown as an annual in our area.

Asclepias tuberosa, our familiar orange butterfly weed, is happily going to seed now with boats of fluff bursting uninvited into wrong places. It is usually welcome for its role as butterfly magnet. Orange may not be your favorite color, but a small dash of it gives life to an otherwise sedate border.

As our zone 7 slides into zone 8 more less-hardy plants can be grown in Tidewater. One family of plants native to the SE US is *Cuphea*. Some of them are annuals, others evergreen perennials but most tolerant of heat, humidity, and drought. If the perennial sorts are not hardy, they make good summer bedding plants or patio-to-house bloomers.

One I had that died as its habitat changed from sun to shade was *C. ignea*, syn. *C. platycentra*, the cigar plant. It flowers from spring to fall with glossy bright green foliage and slender deep red tubular flowers with white rims. At those rims there are two tiny deep purple petals, rewarding close-up study. The variety known as false heather or Hawaiian heather is a bushy shrub with lots of open-faced of pink white flowers, *Cuphea hyssopifolia*.

To discover what survives our summers happily you merely have to drive around a bit, checking what you see in public places. There is a mass use of the acid green sweet potato vine, a perfect background for annuals of shocking pink or purple. That should tell us that edible sweet potatoes will grow here bountifully, saving us from buying them, wrapped one-by-one in plastic at great expense!

Once established, lantana blooms freely through the worst of the dog days. The heat seems to encourage the random colored flowers to range even more widely from pink to red to orange. The true yellow bloomer is a more compact plant for smaller spaces and it too is long flowering.

And there are always marigolds. The *Tagetes lemmonii* is a survivor and the interbreeding in the marigold family has resulted in seedlings to match any décor. Stark white has not been achieved but there is a very pale yellow one, 'Vanilla'. The marigold foliage, strongly scented, can irritate some people and to avoid a smelly vase, remove the foliage (using gloves if you must) from below the water line and change the water frequently. Nothing says summer more eloquently than an old copper teakettle crammed with marigolds.