

Plant Heat-Loving Ornamentals in Fall

By Rachel Oppedahl

As our summers get longer and hotter, it makes sense to design—or redesign—our ornamental gardens with plants that thrive in blistering heat. The irony is, even heat-tolerant plants will fare better if they're first given the long, cool, wet months of fall and winter to establish a strong root system (before triple-digit heat arrives again). So, if you can find them in your favorite nursery, here is a short list of plants that will put on a show for you next summer, often when others fade. All do best in full sun.



Crape Myrtle

Natives – Not surprisingly, the plants that have evolved in our region—and hopefully, continue to adapt to climate change—are the ones best suited to long, hot, dry summers. For ornamental gardens, try these flowering stalwarts: California fuchsia (*Epilobium canum*), a low-growing plant with orange-red trumpet-shaped flowers that hummers love; California buckwheat (*Eriogonum*), also low-growing with dainty white flower clusters; and Matilija Poppy (*Romneya coulteri*), a deciduous bush with lovely gray-green scalloped leaves and large, white flowers with yellow centers.

Crape myrtle (*Lagerstromia*) – A show-stopper in mid- to late summer, crape myrtle comes in tree or bush form. The dazzling flower clusters range from white to pink, red and purple. It's also a four-season delight, with lime green leaves in spring turning orange in fall, and attractive peeling bark. Depending on your elevation, they'll start putting on their flower show in June, July or August. (I'm at 2,800 ft, where mine start blooming in August.)

Russian Sage (*Perovskia*) – While it's not from Russia nor a true sage (although its leaves have a similar aroma), this drought-tolerant beauty is tough as nails. It grows to about four feet tall and as wide, and sports long sprays of small, lavender flowers from mid-summer to fall. The bumblebees and butterflies love it. It looks best if given a little support with stakes or rings.

Sage (*Salvia*) – This is the true sage plant, although not all of the hundreds of varieties are edible. Most *Salvias* are long-blooming beginning in early summer and have tiny, sweet pea-like flowers. They range in size from low-growing groundcovers to mid-size bushes. Hummers love them. And while *Salvias* are drought-tolerant, they flower and fare best with very deep but infrequent watering.

Stonecrop (*Sedum*) – This succulent family includes hundreds of varieties, from groundcovers to small mounding plants. Like all succulents, sedum have fleshy leaves that retain moisture. Most

groundcover sedum sport tiny sprays of white flowers, while the popular “Autumn Joy” (*S. spectabile*), has large, plate-shaped flower clusters that start out pink and fade to a dusty rose in fall.

Daisy-like heat lovers – There are a handful of perennials with daisy-ish flowers that deserve mention. Coneflower (*Echinacea*), with its white, pink or red blossoms, is beloved by butterflies and other beneficial, and in fall, by birds that savor the seed heads. Technically an annual, Blanket Flower (*Gaillardia*) is a long-blooming plant that often behaves like a short-lived perennial by reseeding. A member of the sunflower family, *Gaillardia* attracts butterflies.

A good place to do even more research about heat-loving and drought tolerant plants is the California Native Society’s Calscape website: calscape.org. Their database is set up so that you can enter your address and get the best plants for your environment. Happy plant hunting!

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