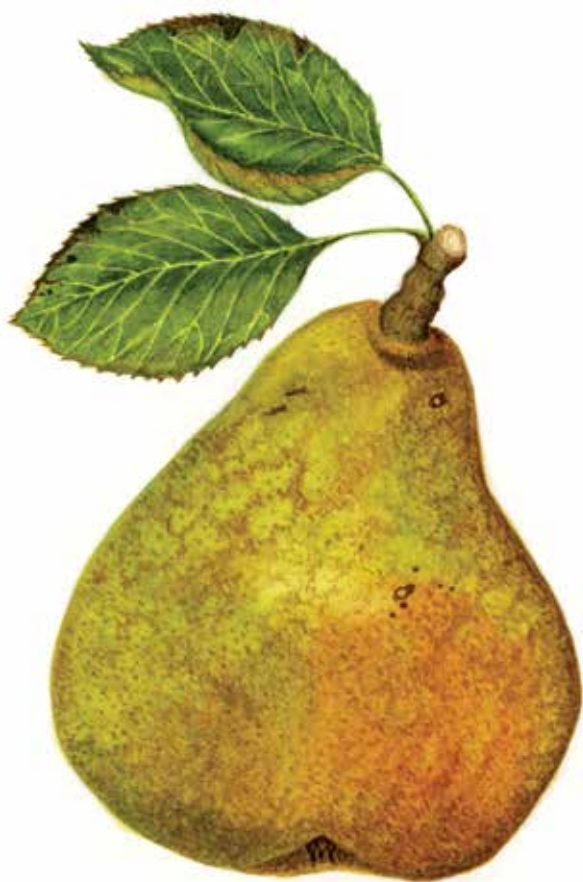


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Stonecrop Gardens, Cold Spring, New York

PART THREE: AUTUMN

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Autumn in New York. Although the jazz standard celebrates the streets of Manhattan, Stonecrop's rural hilltop is just as inviting (if not more so) this season. Here, the glories of autumn in the north-eastern United States illuminate the garden, our many half-hardy and tender plants reach their long-season peak, and we host our favourite event, the annual members' garden party. It is a brilliant if fleeting moment.

A defining feature at Stonecrop is the sense of camaraderie among our members and friends. Frank Cabot – one of our founders – liked to call this the Stonecrop Family, thinking it distinguished this public garden from so many others, with events designed to encourage a special relationship. In just its sixth year, the alpine plant sale we host each April with the North American Rock Garden Society brings hundreds of like-minded enthusiasts (if that is a strong enough word for these rock gardeners!) together from tremendous distances, including Canada. At the intimate evening garden walks we hold throughout the year, visitors and staff explore a particular section of the garden, discuss individual plants in detail, and sometimes retire for a sip of wine at the end. Impromptu conversations often blossom in our tea shop, Café Cycas. Nothing, however, captures the personality of the Stonecrop Family better than our garden party.

Held over the second weekend in September, the Stonecrop Garden Party is the culmination of months of work and growth in the garden, and months of study (and growth) by our interns and staff. It is also a decidedly light-hearted affair, much like the Cotswold village fêtes of my youth and the annual wheelbarrow races we had when I was a student at Kew. Guests are greeted with an array of games, including such classics as Lucky Dip and Guess-the-Weight-of-the-Marrow (or squash as Americans call it), as well as

our recently devised Gnome Hunt. While few children attend, participants can be remarkably competitive. Every intern and staff member at Stonecrop prepares an independent project over the summer. Past topics include 'European Wild Flowers Naturalised in the US', 'Bogs and Barrens: A Brief Look at the Unique Maritime Plant Community of Atlantic Nova Scotia' and for a reorganisational project now underway, 'Provisional Plan for the Systematic Order Beds by Phylogenetic Tree'. Displayed in the Conservatory, guests can enjoy tea there during the party while studying the intellectual fruits of our labour. Various flavoured fruits of our labour do, indeed, abound (we will get to the garden shortly), but first the event's other highlight: the raffle. Once again, all of Stonecrop's interns and staff contribute and there are typically more than a hundred prizes. To enable guests to take a bit of Stonecrop home with them we offer some of our choicest plants and plant collections, alpine troughs, as well as our own various soil mixes and helpings of our much-coveted homemade compost. We are lucky to have a crew with myriad other creative skills, so one might find bird houses, trellises, wind-chimes made from Stonecrop-grown bamboo, and edibles like our *Cornus mas* jam – all contributed to advance 'the cause' and make the day truly splendid and memorable.

In our early years as a public garden, the only time we labelled plants in any significant way was for the garden party. Now, we create keyed plant lists for smaller sections of the garden each week, but the September list – keyed to about six hundred and fifty plants – is still cause for excitement, even among our most frequent visitors. Guests set off with pencils at the ready and list clutched in hand. To give just a taste of the late season treats at Stonecrop, what follows are some stand-out autumn plants and plant combinations.

In the Flower Garden, this is the shining moment for many of what we think of as 'filler' plants (discussed in our summer article), the already mentioned half-hardy and tender plants we set amid a framework of permanent plantings (perennials, shrubs and vines). Gazing around the Inner Sanctum, the central portion of the Flower Garden where the network of beds is organised in colour

schemes spanning the rainbow, it is difficult to create a concise list of favourites.

With its limited colour palette, the White Bed relies heavily on form, scale and texture. An exemplary plant is *Sambucus nigra* 'Pulverulenta', the mottled elder with white-and-green-splashed leaves, in front of *Clematis hexapetala* draped over a wooden tuteur and covered now in feathery grey seedheads, with the large, pendent white flowers of *Brugmansia* × *candida* hanging above and perfuming the surrounding air.

A fine specimen of *Phormium tenax* 'Purpureum Group' dominates the Peach Bed. Its sword-like leaves rise up behind *Carex comans* 'Bronze Perfection' – clumps of very narrow, arching leaves of rich brown sugar that I think of as Tina Turner's signature hair colour. The carex is interplanted with several choice items. Native to the mountains of Arizona and New Mexico, *Agastache rupestris* is spectacular, sturdy and widely adaptable. Flowering from mid-summer well into autumn, it has salvia-like spikes of burnt-orange flowers emerging from dusky plum-hued calyces, all held above fine, grey-green and aromatic foliage. Its tender companions are also long blooming and floriferous. Take *Alonsoa meridionalis*, the mask flower, for example. It offers three solid months of deep orange blooms, while *Fuchsia* 'Koralle' is never without its tubular coral bells. Working with tones of a single colour, even including its brightest forms, this combination is surprisingly subtle. A similar effect could be achieved by using these plants in containers.

In contrast, the theme is decidedly hot and bold in what we call the ROY Bed (red, orange and yellow). Dahlias reign throughout the late season Flower Garden. The star combination here is anchored by the bronzy orange flowers of *Dahlia* 'Gingeroo', with the tight, almost spherical shape of all Formal Decorative dahlias, and *D.* 'Sunshine', a single waterlily variety with deep gold flowers set around brilliant orange centres that pop against their blackish-purple foliage. Pineapple sage, *Salvia elegans* 'Golden Delicious', adds intense chartreuse foliage and delicate sprays of scarlet flowers. Blending in a froth of constant bloom are the clusters of tiny red, orange and yellow flowers that top the tender *Asclepias*

curassavica; the deep red-orange tassel flowers (similar in shape to *D. 'Gingeroo'*) floating on the wiry stems of *Emilia javanica*; and *Cuphea 'David Verity'* with small, tubular deep orange flowers tipped in flared yellow ends. Reaching up to six feet in height are the towering stems of lion's ear (*Leonotis leonurus*) – a South African native we love – that give structure to this combination, stealing the show each autumn when it is covered in tiered whorls of fuzzy orange, slightly arching tubular flowers.

In the Red Rainbow, a semi-circular bed close to the potting shed, one foolproof combination uses the bold, palmately-lobed purple-bronze foliage of *Ricinus communis 'New Zealand Black'* with the tall spires covered in wine red flowers of perennial *Lobelia × speciosa 'Ruby Slippers'*, the upright *Salvia splendens 'Van-Houttei'*, bearing rich burgundy, hooded flowers spaced along ten-inch inflorescences. Dividing this grouping is a large colourful mass of *Berberis thunbergii* f. *atropurpurea 'Atropurpurea'*, a lovely neighbour for the tall spires of *Salvia confertiflora*, with its long, narrow racemes of tiny, red-orange flowers snug in velvety brown calyces over large, roughly textured green leaves. In front is dahlia 'Japanese Bishop', an orange-red Colletterte type with black foliage, surrounded by spikes of *Crococsmia 'Lucifer'* and the groundcover of *Salvia coccinea 'Lady in Red'* and the multi-coloured *Solenostemon 'Tabasco'* with a colourful edging of *Houttuynia cordata 'Chameleon'*. Sunglasses *de rigueur!*

As mentioned in a previous article, the sun and heat that keep our sprinklers running throughout the summer do yield some horticultural rewards, particularly evident in the Grass Garden and the pools and pond of the Rock Ledge. In the late summer and autumn, ornamental grasses of every description burst into bloom and in some the foliage colour changes dramatically over several weeks. While excellent varieties abound at Stonecrop, our native grasses are also well worth mentioning. Some favourites include broom sedge (*Andropogon virginicus*), which turns golden yellow at this season, sea oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*) with flat, pendent seedheads that flutter in the slightest breeze and which mature from green to purple bronze as the foliage becomes copper-coloured.

Then there's *Hystrix patula* (sometimes called *Elymus hystrix*, or porcupine grass), with distinctive inflorescences held high above the foliage that resemble sparsely bristled bottlebrushes – thus the common name. The latter two grasses are useful as they thrive in full sun or part shade.

Our intense summer weather transforms Stonecrop's Rock Ledge. With an impressive alpine moment in the spring, the autumn focus is on aquatic plants, including many tender selections that grace the pools on the ledge and the lake below. While potentially invasive, *Ludwigia hexapetala*, the mosaic plant, is controlled by being confined to one pool where it forms a lush mat covered in yellow flowers. Only in bloom is it easy to understand why this is a member of the Onagraceae family. Another treasure is *Aponogeton distachyos*, the water hawthorn, with unusual white flowers that lift above the water surface and emit the best of perfumes.

In my opinion, some of the best autumn colours are the pinkish tan-to-bronze of the dawn redwood, *Metasequoia glyptostroboides* and the rainbow combination of yellow, orange, red and purple on some of the large shrubs – notably the native *Fothergilla major* and Asian *Disanthus cercidifolius*. A magical contrast appears in autumn when the green leaves of *Acer palmatum* × *koreanum* turn scarlet and are seen partnered with the rigid green leaves of the dwarf bamboo, *Sasa veitchii*, planted below, which acquire a distinctive buff edge. Superb autumn fruits include the red berries of *Ilex serrata*, the orange-red berries of native *Ilex decidua*, the sapphire-blue berries set in raspberry pink calyces of *Clerodendrum trichotomum*, the fat, sausage-like fruit of the semi-evergreen vine, *Akebia quinata*, the brilliant blue and deep red fruit respectively of the native woodlanders *Caulophyllum thalictroides* and *Smilacina racemosa*, not to mention the bright orange pendent drupes of *Viburnum setigerum* 'Aurantiacum,' a plant considered among the best in a genus renowned for its fruit.

Although typically arriving in mid-October, the first frost can come even earlier to our hilltop. As a result, as soon as our garden party is over, we begin to put the garden to bed. First comes the Big Dig, the companion to summer's Operation Flower Garden.

Over six weeks, interns and staff race to lift, pot, and house all of the half-hardy and tender plants that we have spent a full seventeen weeks nurturing in the Flower Garden. As appropriate, plants throughout the garden are cut down and beds mulched. Plastic coverings are put back on the polytunnels, where most of these delicate subjects will spend the coming winter. Conservatory plants that remained potted for their summer display out of doors are brought in on a single day, although the ‘picture’ is refined over the ensuing months.

It is no small feat to successfully overwinter our massive *Gunnera manicata* without substantial loss in size the following year. To do so, we cut off the leaves (which can reach six feet across), wrap the crown in frost-protection fabric, place the large, purpose-built wooden box lined with sheets of silvered foam insulation around the crown, set out slug and mouse bait as well as a max/min thermometer, fill the box with bags of insulating packing peanuts and cover with its insulated wooden lid. The entire box-surround is then covered in wood chips to provide further insulation. This prehistoric beauty adds tremendous presence when it re-awakes, rendering more than worthwhile this arduous yearly ritual.

At the start of November in most parts of the garden, we begin planting tens of thousands of bulbs, often more than thirty thousand annually. To avoid widespread damage, bulbs are planted in the Woodland Garden when the dense groundcover of choice perennials is still visible. This is the culmination of long effort. Earlier in the year, bulb displays are evaluated. Needed items are then ordered, painstakingly organised by type and specific planting location, and stored appropriately. Bulb planting should be completed early in case of that early deep freeze. However, if we’re unlucky we literally need to use a pickaxe to chip away the frozen earth, swaddled in warm winter clothes. Even then, like the gunnera, these sleeping beauties give us much joy to anticipate.

Like the song, autumn at Stonecrop is filled with heady pleasures and just that touch of melancholia that makes this short-lived season all the more sweet. In the pages of *HORTUS*, you have now followed the Stonecrop Gardens and the Stonecrop Family from

early spring, through summer and into autumn. As we all begin to dream of the first signs of next year's spring again, I look forward to bringing you inside our Potting Shed and our Conservatory to share the hidden pleasures of our winter months.

Again I'd like to thank Kate Kerin for her help in preparing this article for publication.