



### **Heuchera Dianne Westlake**

Heucheras, also called alumroot, coral-bells or rock geranium, are hardy, summer-flowering perennials that are relatively easy care once they are established. I grow them for their spectacular foliage although their lovely flowers is a bonus.

The foliage comes in a wide array of colours and tends to form an evergreen mound which, depending upon the cultivar, can vary from 15-60 cm in size.

Wiry stems, from 15 to 90 cm in height, hold numerous, tiny bell-shaped flowers, which may be red, pink, purple, yellow or white. Blooming begins in late May and early June and doesn't stop until the end of August. Deadheading spent blooms prolongs the blooming period.

Heucheras attract bees and hummingbirds and are deer resistant depending upon local herds. Slugs do not find the foliage appealing. Healthy plants do not usually have a problem with insects, disease although Japanese Beetles may target stressed plants which may also develop mold, or bacterial leaf spot.

Heucheras prefer moist but well drained loamy or sandy soil. Good drainage is essential while roots develop but once established, they are drought tolerant. This has been a huge asset the last few years particularly since we are on a well.

In spring keep an eye out for plants that have heaved out of the ground with alternating periods of freezing and thawing. If this occurs, gently press the plant back into the soil. Foliage should not be trimmed back in the fall. In spring plants may be tidied up by removing any withered or tired-looking leaves.

They thrive in part shade but some prefer sunny conditions. It is wise avoid the hot afternoon sun. Read the tag to determine the best location for individual varieties. Foliage colours can bleach out in full sun while plants can become leggy if grown in deep shade. Purple foliage cultivars with marbled or marked leaves tend to keep their contrast best in full sun.

Once you have decided on the location for your new plant, prepare the planting area incorporating compost and some bonemeal, which feeds and encourages good root growth. If the soil is dry, fill the planting hole several times with water. Remove the plant from the pot and gently dislodge some of the potting soil while teasing out the roots. Set at the same level as it was growing in the pot. Spread the roots and backfill with the amended soil. Press gently to remove air pockets and water well. Top-dress with more compost. Water regularly until new growth is evident.

This plant is easy to propagate. Seeds of species germinate readily. Every two or three years, cultivars may be propagated by dividing overgrown plants. Best done in spring or fall, dig and remove the soil from the roots. A spray from the hose will help. Cut away the oldest and woodiest parts with a sharp knife and replant the pieces with the crown at or slightly above the surface. Be sure to replenish the new planting area as you would for a new planting.

Heucheras are very versatile. Their tight compact growth habits make them ideal additions to borders. They pair well with Astilbe, Barrenwort, Corydalis, Autumn Fern, Foamy Bells, Hardy Geranium, Carex, Hakonechloa, Hosta, Lady's Mantle, or Foamflower. Positioning them along sidewalks and path edges also works well.

An all-heuchera bed is incredible for all year colours. A cluster of one variety mixed with different cultivars makes an interesting patchwork effect. They can also be used as specimen plants.

Consider filling an ornamental container with heuchera. Use a good quality potting soil with slow release fertilizer. Place on a shady patio or at your front door. Other than watering and deadheading a few spent flowers, there is little maintenance required through out the season. In the fall, simply plant in the garden and apply a thick layer of mulch once the ground is frozen.

Imaginative breeders have given names like Amber Waves, Stormy Seas and Silver Scrolls. Sometimes it seems that the person who supplied the name was just hungry, using Crème Brulee, Key Lime Pie, Peach Melba and Marmalade. Colours range from a variety of shades of green, through gold and orange to deeper colours of burgundy to nearly black. Many of the leaves are variegated. Obsidian has purple black foliage with white flowers. Lime Rickey has yellow foliage and white flowers. Hollywood's foliage is variegated has purple black foliage with silver markings and has red flowers. There is a colour to suit every gardener.

And of course every year new varieties hit the market although sometimes it takes a few years to be found in mainstream nurseries. Last year I was introduced to one called Midnight Rose. Touted as a breeding breakthrough, the leaves are satin black dappled with spots of hot pink in the spring. As summer progresses, they will lighten and the cream and pink dots will fade somewhat on the older leaves. This one stood out.

These plants are easy care, drought tolerant and colourful! Heucheras have certainly have found their niche in my garden.

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