



Heucheras : the Plant you will Love even if it Never Blooms
Norma Evans
Peterborough and Area Master Gardeners

Everyone loves colour in their garden. When the tulips finally bloom, we revel in their charm and enjoy how they light up the landscape. Then we hope it won't get too hot so they will last and last. When the peonies put on their super show we hope the winds and rains will be kind so they will last as long as possible.

Well let me tell you about another wonderful, easy perennial that can provide colour on a continuous basis. Have you heard about coral bells? They have been around for a long time and the blooms are long drooping stems with tiny bells, hence the name. Coral Bells, also called alumroot, are wild plants found from Connecticut in the U.S. to Western Canada and down into the southern states. A few of the larger varieties are considered suitable for the garden.

And along came the hybridizers in the 1990s and a whole new plant world evolved. Coral Bells have suddenly also become known as Heucheras pronounced "who cur uh" or something reasonably close. The wild ones with good foliage colours were crossed and the first sensational cultivar was Heuchera 'Palace Purple' which is still available. With lovely bronze-toned leaves, this plant is exceedingly hardy, and to the best of my knowledge, it is the only heuchera that self seeds. To give you an indication of how I feel about Palace Purple, at last count I had at least twelve of these blooming away, all from my original plant.

Heucheras form attractive basal mounds of many colours. Most plants grow 8 to 12 inches high and spread 1 or 2 feet depending on the variety so they are easy to place in any garden. There are dwarf varieties such as Heuchera 'Petit Pearl Fairy' suitable for rock gardens.

Personally, I do not care if my plants ever bloom, and have been known to snip off the blooms. . . Some of the leaf colours available are ambers, bronze-greens, gold, pink, purple, and silver veined in many cases. Not only are the leaves interesting colours, the leaves themselves can be heart-shaped, rounded or triangular shaped. They can be smooth, wavy or ruffled.

Actually the names of the plants are interesting enough to entice you into buying: Lime Rickey, Gingerale, Raspberry Ice, Blackie, Silver Scrolls and Frosted Violet. I have not seen all of these cultivars, but new ones come out quickly with tissue culture, and the future looks bright for even brighter varieties. My newest purchase, and the inspiration for this article is Georgia Peach. Does it bloom? Who cares? It is peachy perfect and is even more attractive than my previous favourites,

'Orange Marmalade' and 'Strike It Rich Gold'.

Heucheras have few pests and diseases. The worst pest is apparently the Black Vine Weevil but I have never heard of any plants being damaged in this way. Plants grown in areas that are too moist and shady can develop fungal problems and the writer has had problems of this nature. Heucheras prefer being planted in partial shade areas and perform best if afternoon sun is avoided. Planted in full, hot sun, some varieties will get leaf scorch and some of the bronze or purplish varieties can have some foliage turn greenish. This being said, the purple and dark leaves can handle more sun and the yellows, light ambers, etc. need more shade.

These plants like well-drained, rich, neutral soil. Heucheras can die over the winter from being heaved up by the frost. Why this plant should be more vulnerable is a good question, but it does seem to be the case, so an extra bit of mulch applied before winter should help. A check in early spring and a push back into the soil may save having to replace a favourite plant. The hardiness zones vary a great deal, probably due to the hybridizing, and this may account for this tendency. Just one of my plants heaved up this past winter and a half of it died off, but the plant--smaller to be sure--is thriving.

In any case, we are all indebted to a German professor of medicine and botanist by the name of Johann Heinrich von Heucher (1677 – 1747) who seems to have popularized this plant. Look for more and more varieties in the years ahead and an increased use of these plants by landscapers who are just beginning to realize the potential of this versatile, valuable plant.. Oh, and by the way, Heucheras have been crossed with the native plant Tiarella so you may see some Heucherellas in your travels, but that is for another article.

Previously published in the Peterborough Examiner