Hort Report November 2016

Last year I read an article about interplanting white alyssum with lettuce plants to deter pests, and since I love growing lettuce, and I don’t use pesticides, I decided to try it. Hoverflies are attracted to the nectar and pollen of the alyssum, and their larvae eat lettuce aphids. I saw no aphids on my lettuce, but growing alyssum from seed was kind of a pain, so this year I decided to just buy it, as it’s cheap and common. In fact, I don’t usually talk about common annuals, but this one worked out so well I had to share.

Lobularia maritima (sweet alyssum) comes in many cultivars and colors, and I don’t know which one this is, but it has purple centers surrounded by four white petals. Since I bought it at a garden center, it was in bloom when I planted it March 31st in two urns with hellebores and Ranunculus. It looked really good with the pink Ranunculus and the green and pink tinged hellebores (Helleborus orientalis). By late May the hellebores had lost their nice color, so I dug them back into the garden where I got them (thanks Ann Bryce for the idea!). Ranunculus doesn’t like heat, so I tossed them. The alyssum still looked great, so I added Caladiums, with streaked leaves of pink, green, and white. Around July, when the alyssum looked straggly, I cut it back with scissors to about six inches. It came back better than ever, and now drapes the urn with blossoms. When the Caladiums started to go in September, (they don’t like cold), I dug them to store for next year, and put in purple oriental kale! Another great color combination! I bought extra kale to put in the place of the alyssum when it’s finally killed by frost, but as of today, it still looks great. What a long-lasting flower!

Lobularia maritima grows to about 12” by 12”, both mounding up, and trailing down. It is both cold and drought tolerant, has medium water needs, requires little maintenance, and takes full sun to part shade. The foliage is an attractive grey-green. The flowers are very fragrant, which I didn’t notice until I cut them. Besides pots, it’s good in rock gardens and as edging; a very versatile plant.

I also want to share a plant that I love even when it’s not blooming; Iris domestica, formerly classified as Belamcanda chinensis. I can’t show you its beautiful blossoms, as it flowers in July and August. The six petaled flowers of this plant are orange with red spots, and twist into a spiral when they’re finished. Kris says it also comes in yellow. Tan, fibrous seed pods follow the flowers, and then open to reveal the clusters of black berries. Blackberry lily is the common name. These berries will look good for months, decorating the winter landscape. They self-seed, and the clumps also spread by creeping rhizomes. I have brought seeds to share; simply scratch up the soil, and scatter them around. Maybe cover with some shredded leaves, or a thin layer of compost or mulch. The winter rain and snow should take care of the rest.

Iris domestica plants grow 2 to 3 feet tall, with the flower stalks reaching 3 to 4 feet. The clumps spread to about two feet. They want full sun, and the flowers and fruit are very showy. They are drought tolerant. Whether in flower or fruit, they are wonderful in designs and arrangements.