

# My Favorite Plants

by Cass Turnbull

Late last year *Seattle Times* feature writer, Valerie Easton, asked me for a list and descriptions of Ten Plants I Can't Live Without, aka *indispensables* or *my favorite plants*. I sent in the following article, from which she excerpted for her column during the fall. But I thought you might enjoy reading the rest of the story.

## Plants I Find Myself Trying to Sneak into Customers' Yards

**Miniature bulbs** of almost any sort, but especially snow drops and species crocus, like *C. tommasinianus*, which is not liked by squirrels and increases at an impressive rate. I like the miniature bulbs because the foliage is inconspicuous when it browns out. These bulbs give lots of joy and almost no annoyance. Others: dwarf iris, dwarf daffodils, and grape hyacinths where appropriate (they can spread to make a solid mat of blue, which some people don't like—be sure to add daffodils for contrast).

**Peonies**, especially a tree peony with single yellow blossoms. Peony foliage is really nice and the blossoms are dreamy. Some smell wonderful. Some have flowers so heavy they can't hold their heads up (cut and put in a vase up to their necks). Don't forget to put on the cages in March and use t-bars to hold up the blooms. And don't get all freaked out by the ants (there is a life lesson in there somewhere).

**Daphnes** of almost any sort but especially *D. odora*. I've never had much luck with *D. cneorum*, the rock Daphne, so I don't try it anymore. I still attempt *D. mezereum* (February daphne) periodically. *D. x burkwoodii* 'Carol Mackie' is a great plant: variegated, small leaves, doesn't need much water; sweet-smelling small pink flowers. What's not to like? I got one to grow happily under an old rooty cherry tree, where everything else I tried died. It continues to look great!

But still, *D. odora* is **the one**. Suicide prone, floppy-branched, bleaches out in the sun, defoliates in a cold winter, and yet nothing beats the smell of *D. odora* in the early spring—absolutely nothing! When that fragrance wafts in the garden, her faults are forgiven and we are all very much in love.

**Hydrangeas**, especially blue lacecaps and the climbing deciduous vine. We really need something to come into bloom in the summer. Hydrangeas fit the bill. They are also tough and

transplantable. All but the vine can look pretty awful after a frost turns their leaves to slime. So put them where you will see them in the summer, but where they are not so prominent in the winter. For a long time I didn't like the common garden variety or mophead hydrangea. But I'm a fan of the gi-normous white *H. arborescens* 'Annabelle' seen in the late summer. So what's the difference? When I started gardening 22 years ago, I considered peonies and hydrangeas to be little old lady plants. Now, I like them a lot. Hmmm, what do you suppose that means?

**Any blue azalea or rhododendron**. The early versions like *R.* 'Blue Peter' and *R.* 'Blue Tit' seem to die easily from unknown causes. The newer generations, like *R.* 'Blaney's Blue' and *R.* 'Tower Court', do better.

**Hellebores**, all kinds, with the exception of the Christmas rose, which doesn't do well here. Go ahead, change their names, I don't care. I'll use common names like the Lenten Rose, the Corsican hellebore, and the stinking hellebore (which doesn't really smell bad). Hellebores make good companions for rhododendrons, they can look good for most of the year, and they don't get too huge. They have babies, but not too many.

**Smoke bush**, green or purple. They do have a somewhat unfortunate growth habit. And they grow from a shrub into a tree, so plan ahead. I like a purple one placed so it is backlit by the sun. It makes everything else in the garden look great. I have been told that the smoke bush is my signature plant.

**Other favorites:** *Rosa glauca*, hardy cyclamen, sword fern, colchicums (called fall crocus), raspberries, deodar cedars, atlas cedars, weeping willow, beech trees, all magnolias except the evergreen ones, trillium, columbine, the entire dicentra family, kousa dogwoods (still), maidenhair ferns, deer ferns, *Rhododendron mucronulatum*, and *Rhododendron schlippenbachii*. And because of their versatility, I like the sasanqua or winter camellias.

So that's my current list of favorites. It is a good list for beginners, and for clients who may not be so keen to pay for a new shrub that dies the first cold winter or is destined to become a member of somebody's invasive plant list. I, too, am enamored of the many wonderful new introductions, which one must own to know. But for the long haul I keep returning to these—the tried and true plants of the many gardens I have known. ▲



"Oh, you can move me,  
my dear. But I'll sulk. . ."  
—Peony

"I'm shovel ready!"  
—Sword Fern



"I won't be moved!"  
—Daphne



## Transplant-ability of some of Cass's Favorites