

PLANT PROFILE

# Silver foliage

Plants that sport silvery foliage are essential in the garden for providing contrast, forming focal points and contributing to arresting planting combinations. Choose the right plants and the lustre will linger for longer

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There is a vast range of splendid silver-leaved plants that gardeners can use to conjure up impressive planting combinations and effects, from tender summer hanging-basket plant *Dichondra argentea* 'Silver Falls' 1 – so effective against deep pink and purple trailing petunias – up to gracefully cascading tree *Pyrus salicifolia* 'Pendula' AGM 12. Regardless of the garden position or planting requirement, you will almost certainly find a silver plant to fit.

### What do gardeners mean by silver?

Plants evolved with silver foliage in order to survive hostile growing conditions (see panel p56), but to understand why these plants are so useful in our gardens, we need to pin down what silver coloration actually is. In trying to describe the colour, I turn to *Chroma* by film director and artist Derek Jarman in which the uses of colour are explored. Of silver he asks, 'What is it that separates silver from the colours... Is silver-grey? Is it because of its lustre or its value?' I believe all are true.

Silver is essentially grey – multiple shades of grey – with surface highlights of white that create a sheen. Silver can add light to a planting; it also brings with it a sense of the special, of something worth having, its sheen shapeshifting the atmosphere of a space.

I find silver-leaved plants incredibly valuable to brighten dull spots, and silver proves an easy colour to repeat along a border, providing visual rhythm in plantings, but without being overwhelming. Used strategically, some silver plants can provide instant focal points; silver is by nature a highlight. For a specimen >>

RHS / Tim Sandall; photograph taken on 4 November 2019 at RHS Garden Wisley, Surrey. With thanks to ????

- 1 *Dichondra argentea* 'Silver Falls'
- 2 *Caryopteris x clandonensis* Sterling Silver ('Lissilv')
- 3 *Artemisia schmidtiana* 'Nana Attraction'
- 4 *Stachys byzantina* 'Silver Carpet'
- 5 *Brunnera macrophylla* 'Jack Frost' AGM
- 6 *Teucrium fruticans* 'Compactum'
- 7 *Helichrysum petiolare* AGM
- 8 *Santolina chamaecyparissus* 'Lambrook Silver'
- 9 *Plectranthus argentatus* AGM
- 10 *Elaeagnus* 'Quicksilver'
- 11 *Senecio viravira*
- 12 *Pyrus salicifolia* 'Pendula' AGM
- 13 *Ballota acetabulosa*
- 14 *Astelia chathamica* AGM
- 15 *Leucophyta brownii*
- 16 *Anaphalis margaritacea*
- 17 *Artemisia stelleriana* 'Boughton Silver'



plant, what could be more showstopping than *Astelia chathamica* AGM 14, its arching, sword-shaped leaves with a glistening sheen, a great foliage firework? It is lovely on its own in a pot or great as a feature in gravel garden. Alternatively use it in a border where its bold architectural clumps are a great contrast. It tolerates part shade as well as sun, and requires soil that doesn't dry out.

Also superlative for a feature is *Elaeagnus* 'Quicksilver' 10, easily pruned to form a dome or standard. In spring, its young leaves positively shimmer in a breeze. Larger *Pyrus salicifolia* 'Pendula' AGM 12 has a graceful habit and readily makes a specimen tree, dripping with long, slender silver leaves and, in spring, white flowers. It can, again, be kept trimmed and used as topiary; I personally prefer the looser, less restrained look. Also good for clipping is aromatic *Teucrium fruticans* 'Compactum' 6; use it as a clipped punctuating mound in gravel, keep as a low hedge or try against a background of the late, cobalt-blue flowers of *Cerastigma willmottianum* AGM or also blue-flowered *Caryopteris x clandonensis* Sterling Silver ('Lissilv') 2, itself with superbly silver leaves.

### Silver plants in shade and sun

Most silver-leaved plants of course actively need sun, but happily a few revel in shadier spots, bringing a touch of light to the neutrality and solitude of greens. The sparkling leaves of *Lamium maculatum* 'Beacon Silver' brighten any shady spot, probably best in wilder areas such as a woodland border. Also, for ground cover, *Brunnera macrophylla* 'Jack Frost' AGM 5 is hard to beat, lighting up dark spots, its dramatic silver hearts a perfect foil to sprays of tiny, soft blue forget-me-not flowers in spring. For a more delicate effect in a dark corner, true beauty comes in the arching form of fern *Athyrium niponicum* var. *pictum* 'Silver Falls' AGM.

Silver and grey-leaved plants can also be used unstintingly in a scheme near water: you can never have too many of these plants to pick up the silveriness of the light reflecting on nearby water. Again, *Astelia*, silver brunneras and cascading *Pyrus* would all suit. By contrast, so many silvery plants are perfectly adapted for dry sunny sites and prove ideal in gravel gardens. I like *Senecio viravira* 11, a small evergreen with finely divided leaves; it is really satisfying in late summer with the pink heads of *Hylotelephium* (Herbstfreude Group) 'Herbstfreude' AGM and feathery panicles of grass *Pennisetum villosum* AGM. The *Senecio* is also happy in a pot or a coastal garden, though I find it harder to place in a formal border as its sun-loving, drought-tolerant nature means it looks relaxed by itself; a loose, rounded shrub that starts to sprawl and find its way around other plants. Green-silver *Ballota acetabulosa* 13 with its felted, rounded leaves grows in a rather similar way – it is best with a bit of space around it, as is *Santolina chamaecyparissus* 'Lambrook Silver' 8. This will form dense, aromatic silver domes, adding structure to a gravel garden, or else clip it as a low hedge. Another great choice for gravel, *Stachys byzantina* 'Silver Carpet' 4 provides a mass of tactile, silvery furry leaves, which sit well with grasses in autumn – try it with *Calamagrostis brachytricha* AGM and a mat of *Chamaemelum nobile*. The *Stachys* is also effective as a border edging and excellent in white gardens.

Lovely *Lychnis coronaria* AGM brings perfect silver to gravel and cottage gardens alike, its red-magenta flowers shining against silver-grey stems and foliage; for larger beds, magnificent *Cynara cardunculus* AGM with mounds of jagged silver leaves is dramatic behind huge scarlet poppies of *Papaver* (Oriental Group) 'Beauty of Livermere', softer with pink-flowered *Tamarix ramosissima*.

Also worth growing is perennial *Anaphalis margaritacea* 16. >>



In a shady place, the heart-shaped, silver leaves of *Brunnera macrophylla* 'Jack Frost' (far left) shine beside a pewter-leaved *Heuchera*.

Ideal for sun, a clump of flowering chives (left) looks extra special between silver *Stachys* and *Ballota*.



Repeated along both sides of this impressive double border at Parham House in West Sussex (right, shown in late summer), silvery spires of *Artemisia ludoviciana* 'Valerie Finnis' help to unite and lead the eye along the planting.



### Using silver in white gardens

Silver-leaved plants have long been used to provide structure in white gardens as they show up so well beside white flowers at dusk.

In the famed White Garden at Sissinghurst Castle in Kent, silver *Stachys*, various *Artemisia* and weeping silver tree *Pyrus salicifolia* 'Pendula' bring almost as much light to plantings as accompanying white flowers. It shows how important it is to consider foliage – be it silver or white variegated – both in the background and within the planting when planning any white garden or border.

A great example of a plant used for its foliage within such plantings is *Artemisia schmidtiana* 'Nana' AGM, which can be seen at Sissinghurst and in the Cool Garden I designed at RHS Garden Rosemoor in Devon. This compact, semi-evergreen perennial forms a low mound with soft, fine intensely silvery leaves. Its almost silky foliage is particularly wonderful running along the front of borders, creating highlights and pretty patterns with its delicately laced foliage. The similar selection *A. schmidtiana* 'Nana Attraction' 3 is also often grown.

In this white garden (left), structure is provided by silver-leaved *Pyrus salicifolia* 'Pendula' AGM and *Elaeagnus* 'Quicksilver', while *Artemisia* spills through a border of white-flowered perennials.

## Silver foliage

This produces compact domes of silver foliage and clusters of papery flowers in late summer. It's an odd plant: close up its little flowers aren't filled with excitement, but as a general effect they bring easy silver to beds and borders.

Summer pots can show their metal with various tender silvery perennials, too. As well as cascading *Dichondra argentea* 'Silver Falls', there is trailing *Helichrysum petiolare* AGM 7 which by late summer neatly intermingles with lilac *Verbena bonariensis* AGM and the second flush of fresh green geranium foliage. For bold leaves, try lush, velvety *Plectranthus argentatus* AGM 9; for something curious, *Leucophyta brownii* 15: with its densely branched metallic stems, the plant almost appears to be crafted from silver wire.

### Using silver in colour drama

Perhaps the most exciting part about silver-leaved plants is the way they can team with others in a wide ranging mix of effects. Even subtle changes in the tone of planting partners are somehow amplified by the use of silvery plants.

Imagine for example black and orange bearded irises against a silver backdrop: that would grab the attention, spark curiosity. Yet move the orange along to peach, and the impression is altogether dreamier. Silver evokes a magical feeling mixed with black-purple and palest blue: perhaps black-flowered *Iris chrysographes* AGM with *Artemisia stelleriana* 'Boughton Silver' 17 and a smattering of sapphire *Nigella damascena* 'Miss Jekyll' AGM. Combine silver instead with red-purple and add pink, and everything becomes rather more romantic. I have in mind the smoky leaves of *Cotinus coggygria* 'Royal Purple' AGM with *Verbena bonariensis* and *Artemisia absinthium* 'Lambrook Silver'.

Lemons and pinkish mauves also work well: try artemisia with *Eupatorium maculatum* Atropurpureum Group and pale yellow daylily *Hemerocallis* 'Lark Song'. Blues and greens by themselves can be cooling, but interweave drifts of silver and you create light. Try *Geranium endressii* AGM with *Dianthus gratianopolitanus* AGM (Cheddar pink) against a camaieu of artemisia, lavender-blue *Nepeta racemosa* 'Walker's Low' AGM and soft pink-blue aster *Symphotrichum novi-belgii* 'Porzellan'. For a more natural look, the feathery green leaves of *Foeniculum vulgare* (fennel) and silver *Stachys* light up the underskirts of *Rosa* 'Ghislaine de Féligonde' AGM in my own garden. That in essence is the beauty of silver-leaved plants; the range is so wide, that whatever your tastes or needs, there are probably perfect contenders for your garden. ○

## Why are some plants silver?

### Silvery sun lovers

Often the sheen of silver is an illusion created by soft small hairs on the leaves catching and reflecting light, helping plants thrive in testing wild habitats, from windswept mountainsides and steppes to salty Mediterranean coast. The hairs deflect wind and reduce evaporation, keeping plants cool in hot weather.

Some plants such as succulents have a silvery waxy layer to help retain moisture.

### Silver in shade

A few silver plants are adapted to shade – these may have large or delicate leaves (such as some *Brunnera*) and are often mottled with silver, perhaps to visually break up the leaf and deter predation, an issue in wooded environments.



PHOTO CREDIT

Few plants make a more arresting focal point than *Astelia chathamica* (left), its arching blades suiting a large container perfectly.



PHOTO CREDIT

In this low pot (left) silver plants sparkle, their texture giving contrast: *Leucophyta brownii*, *Helichrysum italicum* and bolder *Jacobaea maritima*.



PHOTO CREDIT

A silver border with a Mediterranean flavour (above) containing *Teucrium*, *Lychnis*, *Ballota* and bold *Cynara*. Floral highlights are provided by purple *Allium* and white *Nigella*.