

Halloween Blossoms

I enjoy Halloween, but I'm afraid that orange and black has never been my favorite color combination. I always felt sorry for my parents because they graduated from a High School (Los Gatos) with orange & black school colors. (Not that I thought my own purple & gold were very exciting, either. Sorry Camden Cougars!) So even though the orange and black combo doesn't work for me, there is definite drama to plants with black flowers. True black flowers are rare, but there are enough spooky shades of near black flowers to write a tribute for this month of ghosts & ghouls. Since flower color is the one unifying theme, let's just take them in alphabetical order.

Alcea rosea (hollyhock) is an old fashioned cottage garden flower. There are many varieties with striking black or purplish black flowers, 'Nigra' and 'Black Beauty' are two such varieties. Hollyhocks are tall skinny plants that send a flowering spike up perhaps 8' tall. The flowers are large and showy, up to 5" across, and the hairy leaves are big, scalloped, and somewhat round. Some hollyhocks can bloom from seed planted in the same year, otherwise you can plant seeds in late summer for a full spring/summer of flowers the next year. All hollyhocks are prone to a disease called rust, otherwise they are very easy to grow.

Aquilegia (columbine) is a wildflower found in many parts of the world, and all over the Western U.S. The domesticated version has lost none of the fairyland charm found in the wild. The foliage looks very ferny, and the flowers have a delicate dancing quality. The flowers on *A. vulgaris* 'William Guinness' face downward, and have a row of white petals that look like a petticoat. The throat of the flower is maroon chocolate, as are the pointed sepals that form a row of color around the petals. Spurs of the same chocolate color point skyward, this whole effect leads to the common name of magpie columbine.

Cosmos atrosanguineus is the chocolate cosmos, with the common name referring to both the chocolate brown (OK, it's not really black) flower color, and the wonderful chocolate (vanilla to some noses) fragrance. It's just a really cool plant, native to Mexico, that grows from root tubers. The clump will increase yearly. The foliage is somewhat messy, but all is forgiven late in the day when you hold one of the daisy shaped flowers close to your nose. It makes an excellent cut flower.

Iris chrysographes isn't the easiest iris to find, but the velvety black petals veined with gold make it worth trying! It has a very elegant flower, like that 'little black dress', accented with perfect gold jewelry.

Papaver somniferum is the opium poppy. 'Black Beauty' and 'Black Cloud' are two varieties with a seductive maroon black color, and more petals than most flowers know what to do with. All opium poppies are illegal to grow (despite not being a realistic source of opium in

this climate) but seeds labeled ‘breadseed poppy’ are available. The plants can grow 4-6’ tall, and have hairless gray-green leaves. If you cut the flowers, sear the cut edge in a flame to increase the vase life. The seed heads are also interesting in arrangements, or fully ripe seeds can be used in your favorite recipe.

Scabiosa atropurpurea is an annual pincushion flower—what an apt common name! The middle of the flower looks like a small pincushion, surrounded by papery petals. ‘Black Knight’ and ‘Ace of Spades’ both have purplish black flowers with tiny white ‘pins’, and grow and bloom the first year from seed. This annual doesn’t tend to reseed itself, so save seed if you can’t live without it.

Tropaeolum minus ‘Black Velvet’ is an annual nasturtium that sports red-black flowers, a decided contrast to fresh green leaves. This one is a clumping variety, unlike some nasturtiums that will climb and ramble. The flowers are open, blousy trumpets, quite cheerful despite the deep color.

One of the very first black flowers I ever saw and loved was *Viola tricolor* ‘Molly Sanderson’. It is a diminutive pansy, with one of the truest black flowers I’ve seen. There was just something impish about this little black face looking back at me that caught my fancy. It wasn’t all the difficult to grow, but did seem to be somewhat short lived. It grows easily from cuttings, but does not come true from seed.

Let’s end this column with one of the most dramatic of the black flowers. *Zantedeschia* ‘Regal’ is a purple-black calla lily, with a sinuous shape that just screams sex and sophistication. And I’ve just discovered another that deserves a second glance, *Z. Edge of Night*’ has purple-black flowers, rich green leaves with white speckles and a maroon edge.

Go plant it, California!

~Nancy Schramm
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