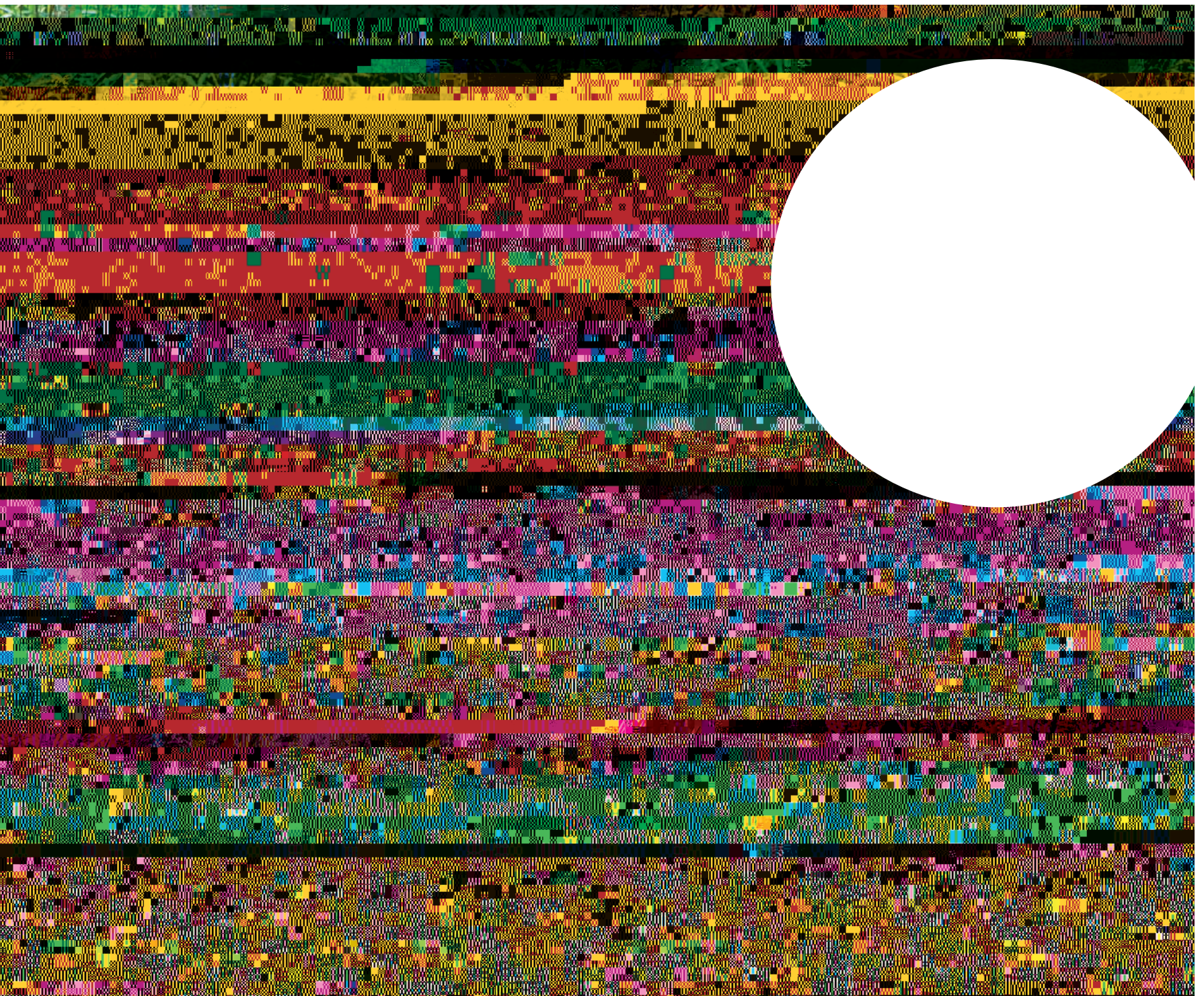




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BY RICHARD HAWKE

For many years, persicarias—also known as knotweeds—

TOP PERFORMERS WORTH PLANTING



[TRIAL PARAMETERS

The Chicago Botanic Garden is evaluating 30 different persicarias in ongoing comparative trials. In 2011, a previous trial ran afoul of an errant bulldozer during garden renovations, so we started over again in 2012. Participants mainly included selections of *Persicaria* spp. and *Fallopia japonica*; numerous nomenclatural changes over the years have complicated the classification of these two groups.

DURATION: 7 years

ZONE5b

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'Firetail' mountain persicaria (*P. amplexicaulis* 'Firetail', photo pp. 36–37) is pretty easy to like: a seemingly endless bloom of vivid crimson spikes sit atop bushy plants from late spring to early fall. The flower color is particularly vibrant on crisp autumn days. A dash of red accents appears in midsummer, and the medium green, arrowlike leaves

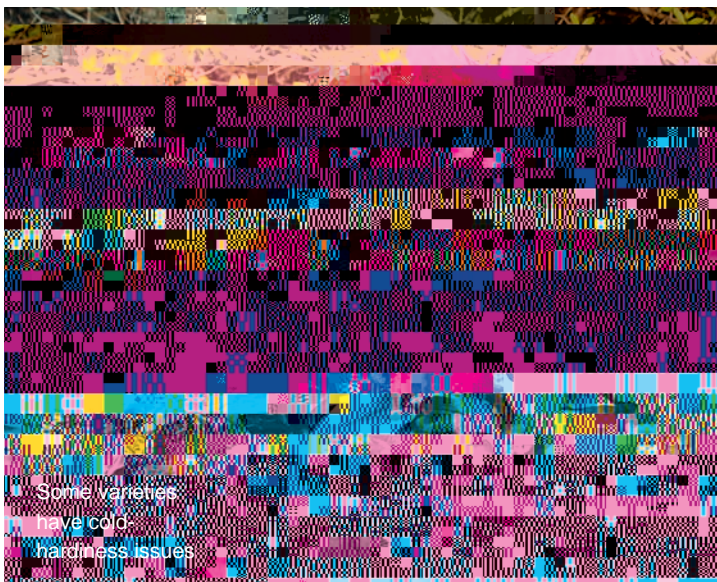
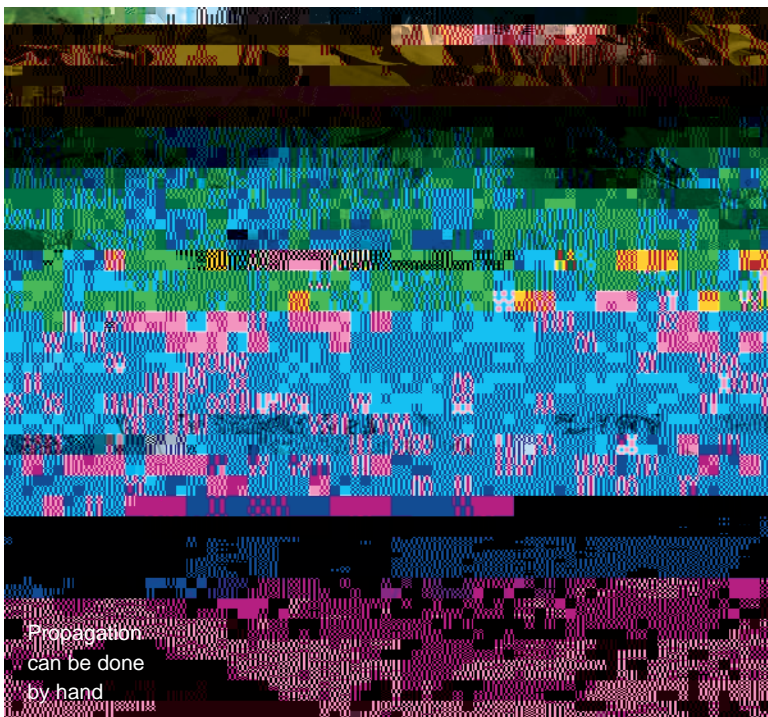
lighten a bit as summer wanes. 'Firetail' proved similar to 'Atrosanguineum' in its bushy habit and size, but I liked the richer flower color of 'Firetail' more. All things being equal, 'Firetail' would have been top rated, but a bit of crown injury in multiple winters cost it a star.

The pale pink flowers of long-blooming 'Rosea' mountain persicaria (*P. amplexicaulis* 'Rosea') rise generously above dark green leaves from midsummer to late midfall. While 'Rosea' presents quite a good flower show, I never found the soft pink as satisfying as the vivid reds of 'Firetail' or 'Summer Dance'. The tiny flowers opened randomly along tapered spikes up to 7 inches long and were busy with bees for weeks on end. Stout 'Rosea' formed big bushy mounds reaching nearly 5 feet tall and wide by the end of summer. Unlike a few similar persicaria, 'Rosea' was fully winter hardy but was not aggressive or weedy.

Mountain persicaria tends to be a rounded clumping plant with large pointed leaves and slender floral spires in shades of red, pink, purple, or white. 'Summer Dance' mountain persicaria (*P. amplexicaulis* 'Summer Dance', photo p. 40) embodied all the best attributes of this species and was the standard whereby others were judged. You can expect a beautiful profusion of uniquely bright coral-red flowers that dance above lime-green leaves for three full months. At 5 feet tall and wide, 'Summer Dance' has bragging rights for being the largest and most vigorous of the mountain persicarias in the trial. If you've got the room, give 'Summer Dance' a whirl.

Golden-yellow leaves can be a tough sell—some gardeners have probably already tuned out—but 'Golden Arrow' mountain persicaria (*P. amplexicaulis* 'Golden Arrow', photo p. 40) is worth a closer look. Radiant gold in spring, the leaves cool to soft yellow-green for the summer, although they are still vibrant enough to glow under the rosy pink flowers. This dramatic color combination is so stunning that you might not notice that the flower spikes are only 3 inches long. 'Golden Arrow' is diminutive compared to other cultivars, featuring smaller, fine-textured arrow-shaped leaves and a low, mounded

Photos pp. 36-38: Mariamne Majerus/Mariamne Majerus Garden Images. Photos p. 39, clockwise from top left: D anielle Sherry, Harry Rose/courtesy of commons.wikimedia.org, A nnie Green-Armstrong/gapphotos.com, Steve A ilken.



[BASICS]

Everything you need to know about persicaria

EXPOSURE: Some shade is essential in warmer zones, but even in the North, Virginia persicaria (*P. virginiana*) appreciates afternoon shade and wind protection.

SOIL: While most species are tolerant of soggy sites, they sulk in dry soils. Crispy leaves are a sure sign of overly dry conditions and/or too much sun and heat.

PROPAGATION: Divide plants in spring or fall as needed to control size and spread. Often you can just pull the clumps apart with your hands. Virginia persicaria and its cultivars can reseed excessively and become a nuisance under ideal growing conditions.

HARDINESS: Our lack of success with *P. microcephala* selections such as 'Purple Fantasy' and 'Red Dragon' (bottom left) was likely a cold-hardiness issue. In multiple attempts, these plants were knocked back hard or killed outright in winter.

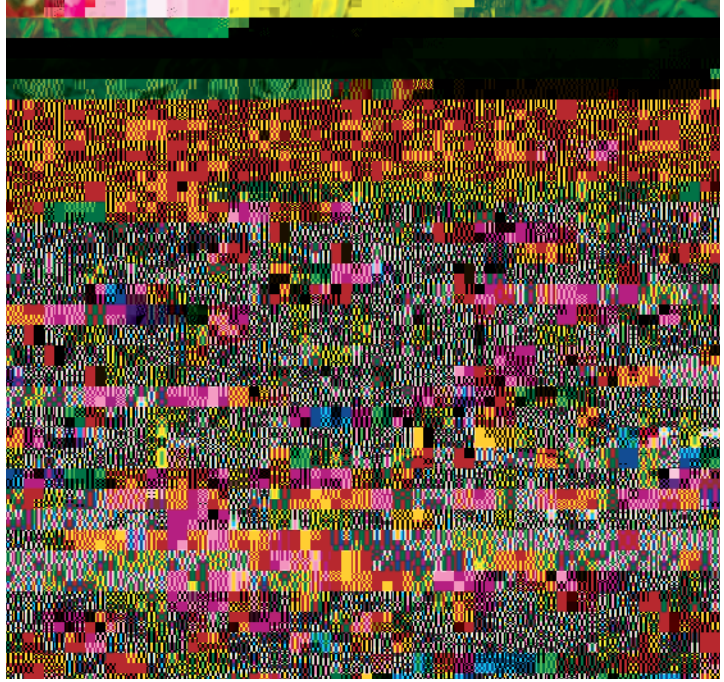
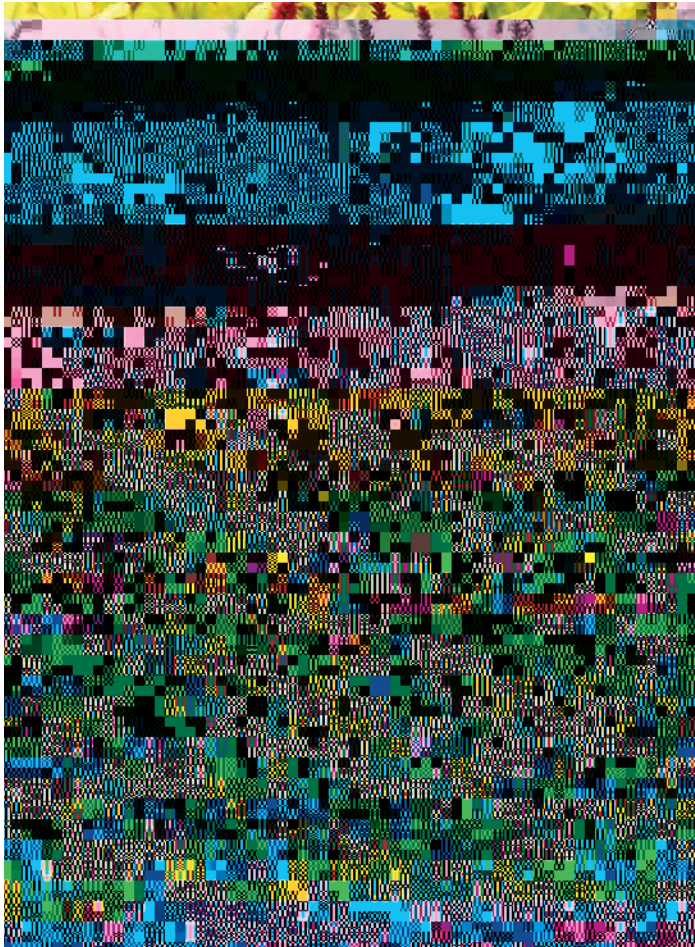
HABIT: They range from ground-hugging spreaders to big bushy mounds.

FOLIAGE: Many sport lance-shaped to broad heart-shaped leaves with long pointed tips. Shades of green abound, but novel color forms such as white-splashed, silver and burgundy, and prominent multicolored chevrons mark the leaves of some.

NAMING: Knotweed, a sometimes-used common name of persicaria, refers to the swollen stem joints or knots at the base of the leaves.

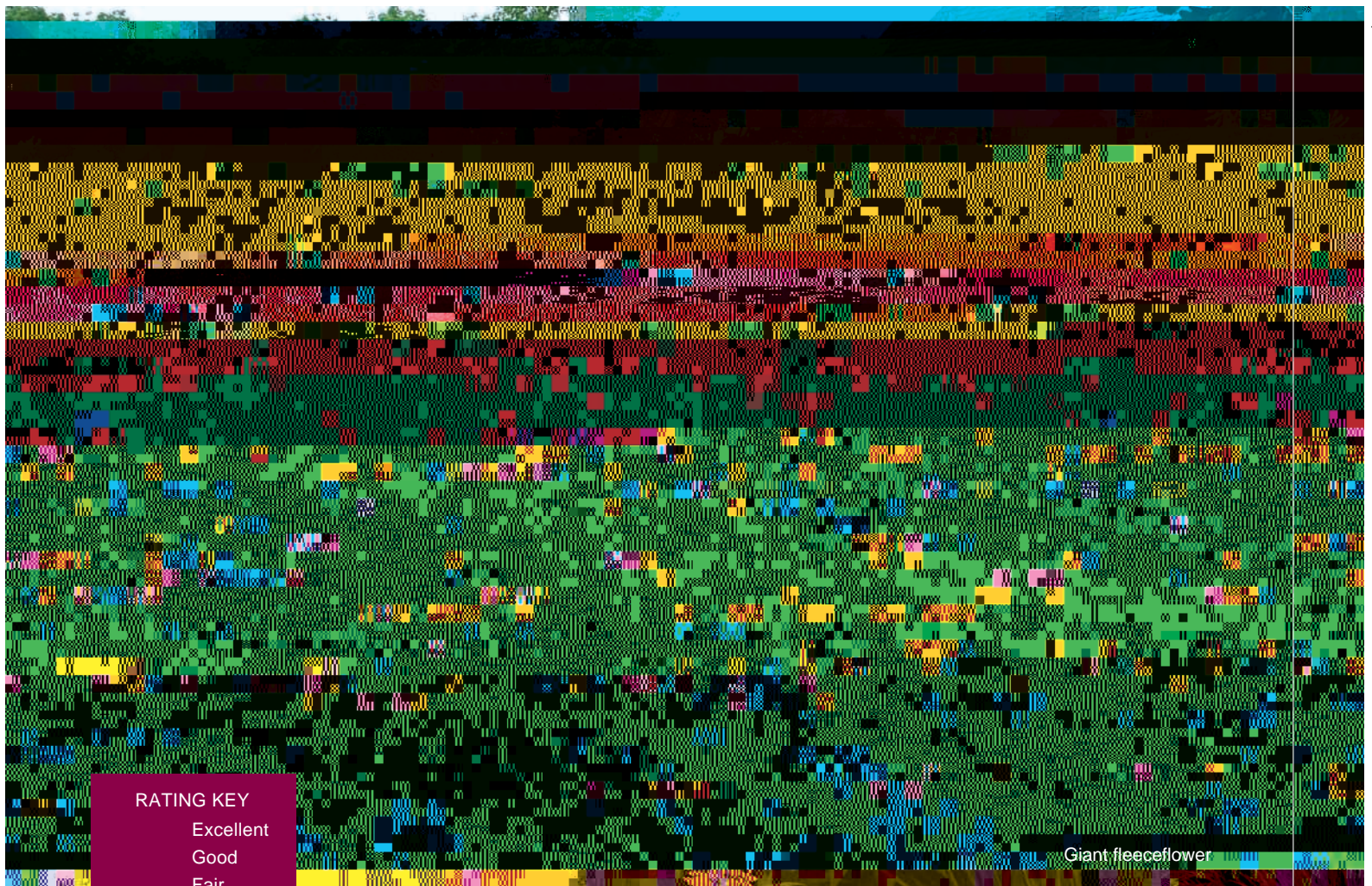
FLOWERS: In summer through fall, white, pink, or red flowers cluster on spikes or sprays. While tiny on their own, they create impact in total. Flower forms range from chubby bottlebrushes to wiry wands.

SEED HEADS: Some seed heads age to eye-catching russet, bronze, or coppery tones. While pretty on their own, they're fetching when mixed among late-season blooms.



habit just 26 inches tall. Too much sunlight bleaches the leaves white, so 'Golden Arrow' is best grown in partial shade.

There is no mistaking the kinship of 'Border Jewel' (*P. affinis*



RATING KEY
 Excellent
 Good
 Fair
 Poor

Giant fleecflower

[PERSICARIA TRIRESULTS]

Rating	Persicaria	Height	Width	Bloom period	Flower color
	<i>P. affinis</i>	18 in.	34 in.	early to late fall	light pink
	<i>P. affinis</i> 'Border Jewel'	16 in.	36 in.	late spring to late fall	pink
	<i>P. affinis</i> 'Dimity'	20 in.	40 in.	late spring to late fall	soft pink
	<i>P. amplexicaulis</i> 'Alba'	45 in.	48 in.	midsummer to late fall	white
	<i>P. amplexicaulis</i> 'Atrosanguinea'	46 in.	50 in.	early summer to late fall	magenta-pink
	<i>P. amplexicaulis</i> 'Blotau' (Taurus)	36 in.	48 in.	early summer to early fall	red
	<i>P. amplexicaulis</i> 'Firetail'	48 in.	50 in.	late spring to early fall	crimson
	<i>P. amplexicaulis</i> 'Golden Arrow'	26 in.	42 in.	midsummer to late fall	bright rosy pink
	<i>P. amplexicaulis</i> 'Inverleith'	24 in.	28 in.	did not flower	
	<i>P. amplexicaulis</i> 'Pink Elephant'	25 in.	36 in.	midsummer to late fall	pink
	<i>P. amplexicaulis</i> 'Rosea'	55 in.	58 in.	midsummer to midfall	pale pink
	<i>P. amplexicaulis</i> 'Summer Dance'	58 in.	60 in.	midsummer to late fall	bright coral-red
	<i>P. bistorta</i> ssp. <i>carnea</i>	26 in.	30 in.	late spring to early fall	light pink
	<i>P. bistorta</i> 'Superba'	33 in.	46 in.	late spring to early fall	soft pink
	<i>P. microcephala</i> 'Purple Fantasy'	18 in.	54 in.	late summer to early fall	white
	<i>P. microcephala</i> 'Red Dragon'	24 in.	60 in.	late summer to early fall	white
	<i>P. microcephala</i> 'Silver Dragon'	17 in.	35 in.	midsummer to early fall	white
	<i>P. polymorpha</i>	72 in.	80 in.	late spring to early fall	white
	<i>P. virginiana</i>	42 in.	48 in.	early fall to midfall	red
	<i>P. virginiana</i> 'Compton's Form'	36 in.	34 in.	midfall to frost	bright pink
	<i>P. virginiana</i> 'Painter's Palette'	36 in.	44 in.	early fall to midfall	red
	<i>P. virginiana</i> var. <i>filiformis</i> 'Lance Corporal'	40 in.	48 in.	midfall to frost	red

Photos p. 40: millettephotomedia.com (top left), M ichelle Gervais (top right), Bill Johnson (bottom). Photo p. 41: Nancy Ondra.

Persicaria: Friend or foe?

You might be asking yourself at this point, "Isn't the horribly invasive Japanese knot-

Photos p. 42: Michelle Gervais (top), Geoff Kidd/gapphotos.com (bottom). Photos p. 43: millettephotomedia.com.

'Blackfield' mountain persicaria (*P. amplexicaulis* 'Blackfield')

SOURCES

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diggingdog.com

† Far Reaches Farm
Port Townsend, WA
360-385-5114
farreachesfarm.com

† Lazy S's Farm Nursery,
Barboursville, VA
lazysfarm.com

† Plant Delights Nursery
Raleigh, NC
919-772-4794
plantdelights.com