

## Color the Garden Beautiful

by Dr. H. Marc Cathey

THOSE OF YOU who know me or have read my columns over the years know that color has always been a prominent influence in my life—probably stimulated by my early interest in painting. Many people know me by my nickname, “Dr. Purple,” and have heard me refer to my granddaughters as Miss Pink, Miss Emerald, Miss Peach, and Miss Ruby.

### ESTABLISHING A COLOR VOCABULARY

As children, color is one of the first tools that our mind uses to identify and name things and objects. Thus our mind makes trees green, poinsettias red, and African violets purple. Yet we all establish a slightly different perception of, or language for, colors.

To add to the complexity, the colors we each perceive are influenced by countless variables, such as what type of lighting is being used (artificial or natural), the texture of the object (glossy, dull, hairy), and the presence of other nearby colors that may alter our perception.

To illustrate this last point, I have a striped tie that I use as a visual aid when doing presentations about color. When I ask the audience what color the stripes are, the answers are always incorrect. When you look at the tie up close, you realize that the combination of black and yellow stripes deceives the eye from a distance, making the black *appear* green.

Because our eyes are not reliable enough to consistently identify or compare discrete color shades, we need technology that will help us do this, as well as a common language to describe plant colors.

### PLANT COLOR SYSTEMS

Over the years, various systems for standardizing flower colors have been developed. The American Horticultural Society’s involvement with color systems dates back to 1957, when the American Horticultural Council—which later merged with the National Horticultural Society to form AHS—introduced the Nickerson Color Fan. This color system



Our lack of an adequate color vocabulary prevents us from accurately describing the many shades of green shown here in the Japanese Garden at Hillwood in Washington, D.C.

was created by Dorothy Nickerson, a color technologist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, in cooperation with the Munsell Color Company. The “fan” came in the form of a small booklet that fanned out to display 262 color samples coded to numbers in the Munsell color system. The Nickerson fan served as the standard measure of flower color in America for some years, but eventually fell out of use. More recently, a color chart developed by the Royal Horticultural Society has been used, but this system has its own limitations.

Fortunately, new technology is ready to come to our aid. The Minolta Company has developed a compact machine that can accurately “read” thousands of shades and tints of color. Using this machine, land-

scape designers and plant breeders in different parts of the country will be able to identify colors by a numeric system that will be linked to user-friendly color names.

I will be talking about the tools used to differentiate colors and the history of color-measuring systems during the AHS Garden School that is being held at River Farm on March 31 and April 1. The program, titled “The Art and Science of Color in the Garden,” will also include presentations by Allan Armitage, Pamela Harper, Tres Fromme, Katy Moss Warner, Sara Poly, and Heather Will-Browne. To learn more about this program, visit our Web site ([www.ahs.org](http://www.ahs.org)).

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