

Norm's Notes

Achilles the Warrior, or Achilles the Healer

Yarrow: Conqueror, or Source of Health and Delight

Common yarrow or *Achillea millefolium* was actually named after the ancient Greek physician Achilles, rather than after his contemporary Achilles, the hero warrior, because the plant has so many medicinal properties. Most notable is using common yarrow's crushed leaves to clot a bleeding wound. Native Americans commonly ate a leaf a day much as we take a vitamin tablet a day for general good health. Nevertheless, this back alley perennial weed when found in a garden can easily become a thug (or warrior) easily out-competing other plants for supremacy. However, if cared for properly, common yarrow in its wide array of cultivars can be a highly desirable garden plant. Beyond the common white flowers, varieties in pink, red, orange, and dusty lavender have been developed. The trick is never to let these plants go to seed, but rather to either let them spread by expanding branches that hug the surface soil, or to divide the clumps every other year or so. Seeds from the parent plant usually not only produce hundreds of inferior offspring of faded blossom colors, but these offspring crowd out their plant neighbors. It should be noted though that if you purchase quality seed, nearly all your first generation plants will produce quality colors. However, destroy any plants that do not produce desired flower colors. Fortunately, yarrow flowers can be used for dried or wet arrangements when picked just as the clusters begin to bloom. This prevents the problem of self seeding. Sadly the flowers of *A. millefolium* only bloom for a 3-4 week period ... not a long time compared to other ornamental flowers. But this is balanced by the intriguing colors available today, ease of cultivation even in mediocre soil, relatively tall height (18-24 inches), and the plant's drought tolerance.



A. Millefolium
"Cerise Queen"



"Paprika"



"Fire King"

But if you want a plant like common yarrow that doesn't invade your garden, try *Achillea filipendula*. This plant not only contains itself, but its finely cut fern-like leaves are more of a bluish-gray than its *A. millefolium* cousin. Furthermore, it only comes in flower colors in the yellow range ... a color missing in the *A. millefolium* species. Equally tall and blooming about a week longer, the *A. filipendula* species wants more water and better soil than common yarrow.



A. filipendula



“Cloth of Gold”

Still for my money, my favorite yarrow is *Achillea ptarmica*. To a casual observer this plant hardly seems to be a yarrow since neither its leaves nor flower clusters resemble the above two species. The flowers are often confused with *Anaphalis margaritacea* or "Pearly everlastings", a plant native to Montana. Indeed, a favorite variety of this yarrow is a variety called "The pearl" which has double white rounded flowers which appear for about six weeks in mid-summer. Like all yarrows it prefers full sun, and like the above *A. filipendula* it also prefers good soil that is somewhat moist. It is not an invasive plant and can be allowed to self seed, though seedlings from a double flowered parent may only produce single flowers that are nevertheless still quite attractive. However, plant division will produce identical offspring. Also like the above yarrows the flowers are good in dried or wet arrangements.



Achillea ptarmica
“The Pearl”