



TIME FOR AUTUMN JOY

By Irene Virag

IT'S ALWAYS SEEMED to me that we're bombarded with names that are aimed more at advertising than accuracy. Labels that defy living up to. For instance, the circus is nice, but it's certainly not the greatest show on earth – and that, children of all ages, is from someone who grew up in the same city that gave the world P.T. Barnum. Not that my hometown of Bridgeport, Conn. has a monopoly when it comes to hyperbole.

Examples abound. If the lion is the king of beasts, where does that leave elephants and boa constrictors? Best Western would seem to be a somewhat exaggerated moniker. And ambrosia is a pleasant summer treat, but I doubt very strongly that it's the food of the gods. To my mind, if you want to talk about heavenly edibles, you'd have to include the word chocolate.

But there are exceptions to this semantic overkill. Happily, there are things that live up to their names, and I'm here to lead a cheer for one of them. At this very moment, it's flowering in my own backyard. I have come not to plant this paragon – that is best done in spring – but to praise it. My beloved Sedum Autumn Joy is perfectly named – it's everything it claims to be and more.

There are about 400 species of Sedum, also known as stonecrop, and Autumn Joy is my pick as the best of the bunch. It was especially a revelation to my husband, whose only knowledge of the genus was the low-growing, good-as-groundcover varieties that he called "cemetery plants" because of their prevalence in the crowded burial parks of his native Queens. He was stunned by the long-lasting, if changing, beauty of Autumn Joy when we gave it a place in our garden.

Actually, this stellar succulent, also called *S. Herbstfreude*, has been a delight for months. It is a deciduous perennial with 2-foot-long stalks and glaucous, toothed oval leaves and, above all, with flowers for all seasons. The flowers debut as broccoli-like green clusters around July and gradually turn pink. I think they come into their own in late September, when they're dusky pink. By October, they are the color of fall itself, with its

bronze and coppery tones. To me, when the sun shines down on Sedum Autumn Joy – it does well in full sun or partial shade – the plant's final autumnal raiment can best be described as burnished mahogany.

I look forward eagerly to its changes – more than that, I can depend on it as a bridge into fall. My favorite sedum is an autumn joy even before the chrysanthemums start showing off. And I see no reason to deadhead it at the end of the season. When the color fades, the seed heads age gracefully – looking like arrangements of dried brown flowers. I find them poetic in winter, especially alongside the silver stalks of Russian sage or the rustling plumes of fountain grass. And when they're rimmed by frost or crusted with snow, the seedheads are poignant with the promise of life. They are still brown in spring when the green rosettes of the reborn plant appear. Only then do I cut them down to let the new growth take over and the cycle of change begin again.

If you haven't tried Sedum Autumn Joy, you really should. You can start seeds indoors in the spring or you can buy plants at most nurseries. It self-seeds, but you can divide and conquer when it comes to propagating. Either divide the roots in the spring, or pinch off 2-inch cuttings and plant them. And despite Autumn Joy's beauty, there's nothing demanding about it. It resists most bugs and, as befits a succulent, it's drought-tolerant - its fleshy leaves actually store water.

There's more to recommend it. Not only is Autumn Joy gorgeous in the garden – right now, mine is mixing wonderfully with feathery miscanthus and pink and white Japanese anemones – but containers don't detract from its good looks. If you have a pot that needs a certain something to hold its plantings together, try this grand sedum. It goes well with everything from hyacinth bean to ornamental grasses. Or as the late, great Henry Mitchell once summed up, "it consorts well with the brilliant yellow-green foliage of sweet basil or virtually anything else." Incidentally, Henry Mitchell also had this to say of my favorite sedum: "In brief, Autumn Joy is one of the few plants I would call indispensable." I'll second that.

There's one other thing I should tell you. I may love my Autumn Joy a little too much. I have trouble disciplining it like I should, and so mine flops over in the fall. I could probably avoid this if I could only bring myself to cut it back at least once in early summer. This would also encourage the plant to produce more flowers, but they'd be smaller. And they might come into bloom a little later than usual.

Maybe I'll do it next season. In the meantime, I'll just enjoy the ever-changing beauty of this stirring flower. And know that there are some things amid the bombast and ballyhoo that really are everything they claim to be.