

# Which *Ligularia* will make your shade shine?

They're big, they're bold, and they're a sight to behold, so find out which ones are built to last

BY RICHARD HAWKE

Simple fact: Gardeners love bold-leaved plants. Large leaves make great foils for the foliage of lacier plants while imbuing the garden with a bit of the exotic, which may explain the tropical-plant craze we've experienced in recent years. But you don't have to rely on plants from the equatorial zone to get a dose of drama. *Ligularias* (*Ligularia* spp. and cvs., USDA Hardiness Zones 4–8) have impressively lush foliage, and they're perennials that are built for the shade. True, their foliage may not be as large as that of an elephant's ear, but their extravagant leaves add a distinct tropical feel to temperate gardens. *Ligularias* are not just one-trick ponies, either; their exuberant flowers can be impressive, too.

Not all *ligularias*, though, are created equal. A closer look reveals a variety of distinctive leaf shapes; striking floral variations; and plants that are large, tall, and small—and some that never really live up to any of this potential. *Ligularias*, regardless of variety, get a bad rap for being difficult plants when, in fact, they're pretty easy to grow if you mind a few basic guidelines. That doesn't mean, however, that there aren't top performers in this diverse group. After putting more than 30 *ligularias* to the test, the following six selections are ones that I would plant again, not only at the Chicago Botanic Garden (CBG) but also at my house, where space is at a premium.



Actual leaf size



'Britt Marie Crawford'

'**Britt Marie Crawford**' (*L. dentata* 'Britt Marie Crawford') is the golden girl of *ligularias*. The emerging leaves are a luscious, glossy, chocolate-maroon and, hands down, the darkest purple of the big-leaf *ligularia* cultivars. But all good things must pass, and like the others, the maroon eventually fades to green while retaining purple undersides and stems. Given more sunlight—morning sun is best—the leaves will hold their color longer. I've seen 'BMC' growing in full sun with intense maroon leaves in midsummer, so I know it's possible (although water was surely plentiful). The coarsely toothed, kidney-shaped leaves can be quite large—well over a foot across—but were typically smaller in our drier garden. Midsummer brings the sultry combination of luridly brassy blossoms on swarthy stems standing about a foot above the lush leaves.

'**Palmatiloba**' (*L. × yoshizoeana* 'Palmatiloba') is another titan on the order of Japanese *ligularia* (bottom right photo, p. 48), which isn't surprising given that it's one of this hybrid's parents. As the name implies, the roundish leaves are palmately lobed and (along with

the stems) are green with a bit of purple. In midsummer, king-size 'Palmatiloba' sports bunched, flat-topped inflorescences of orange-yellow daisies that are truly stunning. 'Palmatiloba' is, unfortunately, a little weak stemmed after flowering, but close neighbors will minimize its floppiness.

There is something exhilarating about '**The Rocket**' (*L. stenocephala* 'The Rocket') in full dazzling bloom; it's like an explosion of fireworks all lit off at once. Lofty spires of bright yellow flowers soar skyward on dark purple stems in early summer. Each flower has only one to three rays, so it looks much less daisy-like than other *ligularias*. I, personally, prefer the color and form of its flowers to other somewhat-garish selections. This is one *ligularia* where the flowers trump the leaves. But don't get me wrong—there's nothing shabby about the foliage, either. Big and bold, the triangular green leaves feature irregularly jagged edges. I once saw a memorable planting of 'The Rocket' at Sissinghurst Castle in England; while I attributed the stunning display to impeccable garden design, I've since

top performers



'Palmatiloba'



'The Rocket'

continued on page 48



Midday wilting

## What you need to know about LIGULARIAS

The words to remember are “moisture, moisture, moisture!”

These leafy beauties are not for every garden because they are a bit picky about where they'll grow. For the best results, plant them in fertile, moist soil in light to partial shade. The site doesn't have to be boggy, although ligularias won't mind if it is. A bit of sun is appreciated as long as the soil doesn't dry out; in fact, some morning sun will bring out the luster in purple-leaved forms, such as 'Britt Marie Crawford', 'Othello', and 'Desdemona'. Ligularias tend to show their bad side, though, when grown in dry, sunny locations. Accepting that ligularias are thirsty plants is the first step in positioning them thoughtfully. On top of that, they are often disd by gardeners because of their wilting ways (see below). There's no way around the wilting—some traits are simply innate—but minding their cultural needs will mitigate the severity.

### > Wilting doesn't mean that it's the end of the world

Ligularias wilt. The midday flagging of the leaves is a natural trait (photo, above) but one that, nonetheless, bothers gardeners. Regardless of light exposure, ligularias droop in hot weather, and wilting in full sun is a certainty—even if moisture is plentiful. (A number of years ago, I encountered a ligularia happily growing in a boggy meadow in Siberia, but it still flagged at high noon.) The leaves recover as the heat of the day passes, and by all accounts, this daily phenomenon does not adversely affect the health of plants grown in moist soils. A truly parched condition, however, may be mistaken for this wilting shtick, but repeated wilting under dry conditions will quickly take on a more ghastly aspect: scorched and withered leaves that do not revive. Protect ligularias from hot sun and drying winds that exacerbate wilting, and cut back any damaged leaves to coax healthy ones from the base.

### > A little deadheading goes a long way

When it comes to the flowers of big-leaf ligularias, it seems that gar-

deners either love 'em or hate 'em. The blooms, admittedly, can be a bit brash—I, personally, can give or take the flowers because the foliage is the real draw—but the almost incandescent golden orange flowers superbly enliven shadowy places. A few gardeners I've known, channeling the Queen of Hearts, imperiously proclaim, “Off with their heads!” at the first sign of buds. I don't subscribe to that methodology, but if you do allow the plants to flower, you must dead-head. The flowers of ligularias do not age gracefully and should be lopped off as the rays blacken. This prevents seed production, so plants can put their energy into maintaining healthy leaves for the rest of the summer.

### > Counteract Swiss-cheese syndrome with diligent pruning

Slugs and Japanese beetles are rapacious feeders on ligularia foliage, and with the exception of Japanese ligularia, all of the plants in our trial had run-ins with them. These pesky pests can quickly turn lush, handsome leaves raggedy, making a once-vibrant plant a tired and sad wreck (inset photo, right). Removing slug-holed leaves at the base encourages regrowth of new leaves. You can try using any combination of baits or traps to counter the attack, but I have yet to see anything that will deter a determined slug heading for a lush ligularia.

### > You can expect a midseason color change

Many big-leaf ligularias flaunt purple leaves in spring, which fade to a greenish color as the season progresses (photo, right). But some will hold on to at least some color on their undersides and leaf stems (or petioles) throughout summer.



Summer color transition of Siberian ligularia (*L. sibirica*)

#### Overall ratings:

- \*\*\*\* Excellent
- \*\*\* Good
- \*\* Fair
- \* Poor



### How we did the trial

Since 2004, CBG has evaluated nearly 30 types of ligularias including garden standards and new hybrids, a sampling of which is represented in the chart below.

• **HOW LONG:** A minimum of four years

• **CRITERIA:** Ornamental qualities, ease of growth, hardiness, and disease and pest resistance (specifically slugs)

• **ZONE:** 5b

• **CONDITIONS:** Shade; well-drained, alkaline soil. Mature trees provided natural shade but also contributed to occasional periods of dry soil conditions. The plants generally received about three hours of sunlight, but shifting light patterns throughout the day meant that some plants received morning sun, while others saw midday or late-day sun.

• **CARE:** Minimal, thereby allowing the plants to thrive or fail under natural conditions

Rating	Name	Height with flowers	Width	Leaf color	Flower color	Bloom period	Flower size (length)	Flower coverage
****	<i>Ligularia dentata</i> 'Britt Marie Crawford'	34 inches	40 inches	Purple fading to bronze-green, with purple stems	Orange-yellow	Midsummer to early fall	3 inches	Excellent
****	<i>L. dentata</i> 'Desdemona'	36 inches	42 inches	Purple fading to bronze-green, with purple stems	Yellow-orange	Midsummer to early fall	3¼ inches	Excellent
**	<i>L. dentata</i> 'Midnight Lady'	28 inches	36 inches	Purple fading to green, with purple margins and stems	Golden yellow	Midsummer to early fall	2 inches	Good
****	<i>L. dentata</i> 'Osiris Fantaisie'	27 inches	30 inches	Purple fading to green, with purple veins and stems	Golden yellow	Mid- to late summer	3 inches	Excellent
****	<i>L. dentata</i> 'Othello'	48 inches	44 inches	Purple fading to bronze-green, with purple stems	Yellow-orange	Midsummer to early fall	4 inches	Excellent
***	<i>L. fischeri</i>	42 inches	36 inches	Green	Bright yellow	Mid- to late summer	1¼ inches	Excellent
*	<i>L.</i> 'Gregynog Gold'	40 inches	48 inches	Green	Golden yellow	Midsummer to early fall	2 inches	Excellent
****	<i>L. japonica</i>	69 inches	50 inches	Green	Yellow-orange	Early to midsummer	3¾ inches	Excellent
****	<i>L.</i> 'Laternchen' (Little Lantern)	25 inches	34 inches	Green, with purple stems and veins	Yellow	Mid- to late summer	1½ inches	Good
****	<i>L.</i> 'Little Rocket'	46 inches	40 inches	Green, with purple stems	Yellow	Early summer	1½ inches	Excellent
**	<i>L. macrophylla</i>	29 inches	30 inches	Green, with purple stems and veins	Golden yellow	Midsummer to early fall	3 inches	Excellent
****	<i>L. przewalskii</i>	56 inches	40 inches	Green, with purple stems	Bright yellow	Late spring to early summer	1 inch	Excellent
****	<i>L. przewalskii</i> 'Curly'	43 inches	34 inches	Green, with purple stems	Bright yellow	Early to midsummer	1 inch	Excellent
**	<i>L.</i> 'Ra'	19 inches	30 inches	Green	Golden yellow	Early fall	¾ inch	Fair
*	<i>L. sibirica</i>	56 inches	36 inches	Green	Bright yellow	Late spring to early summer	1½ inches	Good
**	<i>L. stenocephala</i> 'Globosa'	26 inches	40 inches	Green	N/A	Never flowered in trial	N/A	N/A
****	<i>L. stenocephala</i> 'The Rocket'	65 inches	40 inches	Green, with purple stems	Yellow	Mid- to late summer	1½ inches	Excellent
****	<i>L.</i> 'Sungold'	36 inches	36 inches	Green, with purple stems	Golden yellow	Midsummer	1¾ inches	Excellent
****	<i>L. × yoshizoeana</i> 'Palmatiloba'	58 inches	36 inches	Green	Orange-yellow	Mid- to late summer	3½ inches	Excellent
**	<i>L.</i> 'Zepter'	52 inches	34 inches	Green, with purple stems	Orange-yellow	Midsummer	¾ inch	Excellent

## top performers

continued from page 45



'Osiris Fantaisie'



Shavalski's  
ligularia



Japanese  
ligularia

Photos, except where noted: Danielle Sherry; p. 45 (top left) and p. 46 (top left) and p. 46 (top left) and p. 46 (top left), courtesy of Chicago Botanic Garden; p. 45 (top right), courtesy of Chicago Botanic Garden; p. 45 (bottom right), Doreen Wynja; p. 48 (left and top right) and p. 49 (second from top), millietphotomedia.com; p. 49 (top), courtesy of perennialresource.com; p. 49 (second from bottom), courtesy of Terra Nova Nurseries; p. 49 (bottom), courtesy of Darwin Perennials

### [ SOURCES ]

The following mail-order plant sellers offer many of the ligularias featured:

**Big Dipper Farm,**  
Black Diamond, Wash.;  
360-886-8253; big  
dipperfarm.com

**Digging Dog Nursery,**  
Albion, Calif.; 707-937-  
1130; diggingdog.com

**Bluestone Perennials,**  
Madison, Ohio;  
800-852-5243; bluestone  
perennials.com

**Lazy S'S Farm  
Nursery,** 2360 Spots-  
wood Trail, Barbours-  
ville VA 22923; lazy  
ssfarm.com

seen this plant grown to perfection here at home with little or no care. Simply mind its moisture needs for success.

'**Osiris Fantaisie**' (*L. dentata* 'Osiris Fantaisie') was a late addition to the trial, not coming to us until 2008, but we quickly learned that it was a standout—not only for its fanciful name but also for its differences from the classic forms of other big-leaf ligularias. Heart-shaped purple leaves emerge in spring, swiftly turning to dark green with purple veins and red-purple stems. While that sounds all too familiar, the wavy margin allows peeks at the glossy purple undersides, much like teasing glimpses of a cancan dancer's petticoats. To be honest, the golden flowers feel somewhat like an afterthought on this delightfully frilled beauty. Although not entirely resistant to slugs, 'Osiris Fantaisie' seems to be less desirable, perhaps due to its thick rubbery foliage.

While I don't pretend that I wouldn't struggle with the pronunciation of a word starting with "prz," I would never have gotten close to the actual pronunciation of *Ligularia przewalskii* (sha-VAL-ske-ee). **Shavalski's ligularia** is a stout plant with triangular green leaves that are deeply cut into fingerlike segments. Bright yellow flowers, with two or three rays each, are borne in many-flowered, purple-stemmed spikes that are up to 21 inches long and 3 inches wide. Shavalski's ligularia is the perfect pairing of dramatic flowers and exceptional foliage.

There's no denying that **Japanese ligularia** (*L. japonica*) is the Goliath of this group, topping off at nearly 6 feet tall with flowers. Its robust demeanor extends to the dissected, palm-shaped leaves, which, at 16 inches wide, are the largest and laciest of all. If you blink, you may miss the hint of bronze as the leaves open. But don't fret as the green leaves, like frilly parasols, are truly distinctive and not diminished in the least by the lack of purple. In early summer, yellow-orange flowers tower high above verdant mounds. Each blossom is nearly 4 inches across, yet the few-flowered clusters are underwhelming for a plant of its size. I enjoy the buds more than the open flowers—they resemble squat green pumpkins clothed in soft hairs (the tall flower stalks are hairy, as well). On a positive note, slugs did not appear to fancy Japanese ligularia; but on the downside, floppy stems after flowering kept this cultivar from earning the number-one spot.

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## New kids on the block

The following ligularias are supernew to the trial, but their promising start makes me excited to watch how they develop over the next few years.

- '**Bottle Rocket**' (*L. stenocephala* 'Bottle Rocket'), the third generation in the Rocket line, is the smallest yet. At 28 to 34 inches tall, it's a good foot shorter than 'Little Rocket' and more than 2 feet shorter than 'The Rocket' (bottom right photo, p. 45). Spikes of mustard yellow flowers explode upward from the center of the plant in midsummer. It owes its compactness, in part, to the flower spikes sitting right at the top of the dense leafy mound. Like its predecessors, 'Bottle Rocket' has heart-shaped green leaves with serrated margins; according to some reports, 'Bottle Rocket' may be more heat tolerant, though, thanks to its thicker leaves. Given this potential and the quality of the other Rockets, I have high hopes for this plant in the coming seasons.

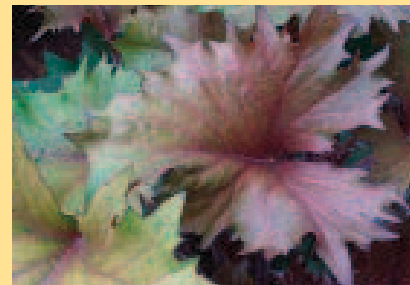
- For dramatic effect, look no further than '**Osiris Café Noir**' (*L. dentata* 'Osiris Café Noir'), one of the newest introductions in the Osiris series. The black-purple color of the emerging leaves remind me of 'Blackie' sweet potato vine (*Ipomoea batatas* 'Blackie', Zone 11). But that's just the start as the color moves from deepest purple to bronze and finally to olive green with purple veins. The leaf form is an exaggerated arrowhead with large, jaggedly irregular teeth. Golden yellow daisies crown purple stems in midsummer before the leaf color deepens again to bronze-green in fall. Our plants went through the color stages pretty quickly last summer—but then, it was one of the hottest summers on record.

- If you're looking for something exotic, '**Dragon Wings**' (*L. przewalskii* 'Dragon Wings') fits the bill. Its deeply dissected leaves are more spidery than the species and up to 1 foot wide. Long slender spires of yellow flowers on purple stems tower nearly 5 feet tall in summer. My first impression is that 'Dragon Wings' is exceptional with or without flowers. I tip my hat to the creative minds at Terra Nova Nurseries for seeing a dragon's wings and breath ('Dragon's Breath' is a smaller selection that we also grew last summer) in these leaves. Perhaps that sounds like I'm disparaging the names. On the contrary—I'm intrigued by the notion. After all, what story isn't better with a dragon and a wizard?

- Like a chameleon, the variegated leaves of '**Granito**' (*L. 'Granito'*) change throughout the season. The mottled-green-and-bronze variegation of the new leaves looks like verdigris. Later, as the bronze fades away, it gets a mix of green and taupe flecks, eventually morphing to shades of green in summer. This speckled or dappled appearance gave me a "duh" moment when I realized that granite is the simple translation of 'Granito'. The charm of the color shift is enhanced by curly margins that bring the leaves to life. Deep purple stems hold sprays of golden yellow flowers over the compact plants, only 2 feet tall and wide. I think 'Granito' will give the best show in more light, so plant it in a moist, highly shaded place, then sit back and enjoy.



'Bottle Rocket'



'Osiris Café Noir'



'Dragon Wings'



'Granito'