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 focal points for the foliage of lacy 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.

‘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. × yoshiiwana ‘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.

‘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, where I attributed the stunning display to impeccable garden design, I’ve since continued on page 48
These leafy beauties are not for every garden because they are a bit pernickety 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 lot of sun is tolerated 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 ‘Still Maria Crawford’, ‘Otello’, and ‘Desdemona’. Ligularias tend to show their bad sides, 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 disliked 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 will. The misleading 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 cultural need. Despite the rays blacken. This prevents seed production, so plants can put their energy into maintaining healthy leaves for the rest of the summer.

Counterfeit 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 turn quickly lush, handsome leaves ragged, 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 sport 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.

Ligularia dentata ‘Brenda Marie Crawford’

30 inches 40 inches Purple fading to bronze-green, with purple stems Orange-yellow Midsummer to early fall 2½ inches Excellent

L. dentata ‘Desdemona’

36 inches 42 inches Purple fading to bronze-green, with purple stems Yellow-orange Midsummer to early fall 3 inches Excellent

L. dentata ‘Midnight Lady’

36 inches 36 inches Purple fading to bronze-green, with purple margined stems Golden yellow Midsummer to early fall 2 inches Good

L. dentata ‘Osthala’

48 inches 44 inches Purple fading to bronze-green, with purple stems Yellow-orange Mid- to late summer 3 inches Excellent

L. ‘October Gold’

42 inches 36 inches Green Bright yellow Mid- to late summer 1½ inches Excellent

L. japonica

69 inches 50 inches Green Yellow-orange Early to midsummer 3½ inches Excellent

L. ‘Summerland’ ‘Little Lantern’

25 inches 34 inches Green, with purple stems and veins Yellow Mid- to late summer 1½ inches Good

L. macrophylla

28 inches 30 inches Green, with purple stems and veins Golden yellow Midsummer to early fall 3 inches Excellent

L. × praecox ‘Zepter’

58 inches 36 inches Green, with purple stems Orange-yellow Mid- to late summer 3½ inches Excellent

L. ‘Ita’

19 inches 30 inches Green Golden yellow Early fall ½ inch Fair

L. abricina

56 inches 36 inches Green Bright yellow Late spring to early summer 1½ inches Excellent

L. × superba ‘Palmatiloba’

38 inches 36 inches Green Orange-yellow Midsummer to early fall 3 inches Excellent

L. ‘Zepter’

52 inches 34 inches Green, with purple stems Orange-yellow Midsummer ½ inch Excellent

How we did the trial
Since 2004, CGB has evaluated nearly 30 types of ligularia including garden standards and new hybrids, a sampling of which is represented in the chart below.

ZONE: 5b
CONDITIONS: Thirsty; well-drained, alkaline soil. Mature trees provide natural shade but also contribute to occasional periods of dry soil conditions. The plants generally required about three hours of sun, but shifting light patterns throughout the day meant that some plants received morning sun, while others saw midday or late-day light.

CARE: Minimal, thereby allowing the plants to thrive or fail under natural conditions
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. 49). 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* ![Japanese ligularia](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Osiris Fantaisie**

*Osiris Fantaisie* (*L. dentata* ‘Osiris Fantaisie’) was a late addition to the trial, not coming to us until 2006, 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 peaks at the glossy purple underside, much like leaning 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 “ju,” I would never have gotten close to the actual pronunciation of Ligularia przewalskii (sha-VIL-ske-we). Shavalski’s ligularia is a stout plant with triangular green leaves that are deeply cut into finger-like segments. Bright yellow flowers, with two or three rays each, are borne in many-flowered, purple-stemmed spikes that are up to 16 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, pink-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 sly wasps, are truly dis- tinctive and not diminished in the least by the lack of purple. In early summer, yellow-orange flowers tower high above verdant mounds. Each blossom of purple. In early summer, yellow-orange flowers explode upward from the center 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.

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**Osiris Café Noir**

*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 this last summer—but then, it was one of the hottest summers on record.

*If you’re looking for something exotic,* ![Dragon Wings](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Dragon Wings** (*L. przewalskii* ‘Dragon Wings’) fits the bill. Its deeply dissected leaves are more spindly than the species and up to 1 foot wide. Long slender spikes 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 this potential and the quality of the other Rockets, I have high hopes for this plant in the coming seasons.

**Like a chameleon, the variegated leaves of** ![Grants](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Grants** (*L. x Grandis*) change throughout the season. The mottled-green-and-bronze variegation of the new leaves turns 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 *Grants*. The color change is enhanced by curvy margins that bring the leaves to life. Deep purple stems hold sprays of yellow flowers over the compact plants, only 2 feet tall and wide. I think ‘Grants’ will do the best shows in more light, so plant it in a moist, highly shaded place, then sit back and enjoy.