

## ***Darmera* – Creating Garden Drama**

Gardeners always look to those plants with great and grand flowers, but, rather sadly, they often forget the beauty and importance of dramatic foliage in a garden's design. The foliage of most perennials is rather fine and delicate in texture, visually giving the Garden a light and airy feeling. The addition of bold foliage provides the 'visual weight' needed to anchor the Garden and to add that touch of drama. Such perennial plants are hard to find until I discovered and began my love affair with Indian Rhubarb, *Darmera peltata*!

Indian Rhubarb is native from Oregon, south into Northern California and is a member of the Saxifragaceae or Saxifrage Family (photograph on right was taken at Cornell Plantations in Ithaca NY). In fact, its family roots were reflected in its original botanical name of *Saxifraga peltata*, as authored by the English Botanist George Bentham (1800-1884). Recognizing that *Saxifraga* was an improper genus,



the German botanist Heinrich Gustov Engler (1844-1930) reclassified the plant in 1891 as *Peltiphyllum peltatum*, only for it to be reclassified again in 1899 as *Darmera peltata* by another German botanist, Andreas Voss (1857-1924). The genus name commemorates the German botanist and horticulturist Karl Darmer (1843-1918). This repeated change in names presents a challenge that has fraught many a gardener – an invalid name remains valid in the trade. During the late 1980's I learned this plant as *Peltiphyllum*, nearly 90 years since this name was no longer valid! The repeated reference to 'pelt' is from the Greek *Pelte* meaning shield and describes the 'peltate' leaf arrangement. The leaf stem is attached to the large rounded leaves in roughly the center of the leaf – nearly the same location as where a hand would grip a shield – and thus, the resemblance of the leaf to a shield!



Hardy in zones 5-7, *Darmera* grows naturally in moist and lightly shaded locations along streams and bogs. In its cooler native environment, plants can reach upwards of 5' tall, with a leaf diameter of 18"! The plants slowly spread by 1-2" thick surface rhizomes that ultimately

create a sizable plant of 6' across or better. They are great for stabilizing stream banks! In NJ, the plants grow to a far more modest height and width of 2-3' with leaves to 10" in diameter. In April, the leafless rhizomes gives rise to a ball-shaped cyme of pink flowers (as seen below, photo credit is Jasper33) which slowly unfurls into a more star shaped presentation. The flowers slowly change from pink to off-white with age. The floral arrangement is vaguely reminiscent of *Primula japonica*, the Japanese Primrose. As the flowers fade, the foliage begins to make its appearance. Aside from the foliage being peltate and bold, it also forms a slight cup, with the base of the cup coinciding with the point of attachment of the stem. The cup formation allows it to hold water following rainstorms or heavy dews (as seen in the image above), cooling and moistening the leaf during the midday heat. One of the other common names is Umbrella Plant, alluding to the cup-shaped leaf and its similarity to an inside-out umbrella; most certainly a great topic of conversation during your next social event! Come the cooler temperatures of autumn, the foliage develops deep russet and reddish fall colors.



Aside from the plant having dramatic foliage and flowers, the common name of Indian Rhubarb describes one of its other attributes – the stems are edible! I have never sampled the stems, but supposedly, once the tougher outer layer of the stem is peeled away, the more tender inner stem can be eaten raw or cooked.

In the Garden, it is best to mimic Indian Rhubarb's native environment by locating it in dappled



shade. Even in its native state of California the foliage becomes scorched by August if sited in full sun (as seen on the left). For a more low maintenance garden, plant *Darmers* in mass, as the large leaves effectively shade the ground and keep the weeds at bay. When paired with tall ferns, Astilbe or other fine leaved plants, the textural combination is spectacular. With 3 seasons of interest, *Darmers* is tremendous for creating that

visual weight and 'Garden Drama' that many a modern Garden seem to lack!