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7 inducted into Florida's hall of horticultural fame

By [PENNY CARNATHAN](#) | The Tampa Tribune

Every spring since 1998, a group of super-knowledgeable plant people from around the state sits down to cull through nominations for Florida Plants of the Year.

The program, sponsored by the Florida Nursery, Growers and Landscape Association, identifies trees, flowers, shrubs and grasses with the most consumer appeal. They're the ones deemed best-looking and best-performing, durable, largely sustainable, and disease and pest-resistant.

"They can be fairly new," says Jennifer Nelis, spokeswoman for FNGLA, "or sometimes they're oldies but goodies that are underutilized."

In the past, this year's winners would have been called Florida Plants of the Year for 2010. But the name has changed to reflect a more Hall of Fame-type standing.

"They're now called Florida Garden Select," Jennifer says. "We've taken off the year because it's misleading â they'll all always be great plants."

The seven new winners were unveiled to growers, nursery owners and others in the industry in October. They should be cranking up production so there will be plenty available in garden centers and nurseries early next year. That's the plan, anyway.

Jennifer's favorite is a new walking iris from Brazil, Giant Apostles' Iris or *Neomarica caerulea* 'Regina.'

"I would anticipate it being extremely popular next year," she says. "The bloom is so stunning."

Her second favorite â not so new and already popular with gardeners â is dragon wing begonia. *Begonia x hybrida* has scarlet or pink flowers on arching canes.

The iris and begonia are both best planted in the spring, so more on those and two other top picks, chestnut cycad and tipu tree, in February.

The three Jennifer recommends for planting now are bamboo muhly grass; anything *Dyckia* (the whole genus is a winner); and zebra aloe.

To see all the winners, visit www.fn gla.org/news-programs/plantsofyear.asp.

Bamboo muhly grass ***Muhlenbergia dumosa***

Now is a good time to enjoy this unusual breed of muhly grass, because the fall breezes bring it alive.

"It has that movement; it's very feathery and fine-textured," Jennifer says. "The movement adds a

whole other aesthetic to the garden."

Graceful stems grow 4 to 6 feet tall and sport apple-green, wispy foliage. Also referred to as a shrub, the plant gets about 5 feet wide and spreads slowly via runners, so it's easy to control. It likes full sun and moist, well-drained soil, although it's somewhat drought-tolerant.

Zebra aloe

Aloe maculate

Unlike its better known cousin Aloe vera, prized for sunburn balm, zebra aloe is less about medicine and more about the show. Spotted, spiny leaves produce spikes that can grow 4 to 6 feet tall and produce bright salmon blooms that attract butterflies, bees and hummingbirds. The plant itself gets about 18 inches tall and 16 inches wide.

Like other succulents, it's very drought-tolerant. It thrives in full to partial sun, can handle some salt spray and asks for little to no care. (I have one. I give it absolutely no care.) Plant it in a spot that needs filling, and it will soon spread by producing pups.

Dyckia

It's one of the most cold-hardy in the bromeliad family. Members of genus dyckia also can take the heat. Best yet, they rival succulents for their seeming obliviousness to thirst. But rather than storing water, like succulents, they survive drought by lapsing into dormancy.

There are about 120 varieties, considered perennial shrubs. Most have barbed leaves radiating from a central hub. Foliage colors range from burgundy to silver to tan; the striking blooms are usually orange or yellow. Popular cultivars include "Nickel Silver" (pictured), "Brittle Star," "Silver Dragon" and "Red Devil."