

A look at the best new plants and flowers for 2010

It's finally spring! What a relief, after these past six weeks of gloomy, stormy weather — can we talk about that groundhog now? Here's to the return of electricity for nearly all of us and a look ahead to a glorious season, hopefully, of warm days and pretty flowers.

To help us plan our gardens, we turned to Noah Schwartz, the head grower and greenhouse manager at Matterhorn Nursery in New Hempstead, and asked him for a top 10 list of new plants that will be arriving in local garden centers in coming weeks. In 2006, Schwartz was named Young Grower of the Year by GrowerTalks, a trade magazine for the nursery industry, and he oversees the plants at one of the largest and best-known nurseries in the Hudson Valley.

Having worked with Schwartz over the years and having seen his own garden in Congers, we know how much he loves color, lots of it — and the hotter and bolder the better. So it's no surprise, really, that eight of his picks are brightly colored annuals that promise to bloom their heads off all summer.

Most annuals can't take a late-season frost, so be careful about planting them outside before Mother's Day weekend, the traditional start of the Lower Hudson Valley gardening calendar.

Without further ado, here are Schwartz's winning plants for 2010, in no particular order.

Hydrangea arborescens 'Invincibelle Spirit' (grower: Proven Winners). This new hydrangea has been getting lots of attention in the nursery trade. People are calling it the first pink 'Annabelle' hydrangea, an

old-time favorite with huge white blooms. "It's a great plant for containers as well as out in the landscape," Schwartz says. "It has great flower power." 'Invincibelle Spirit' features bright pink blooms that grow on new wood, so it will still produce flowers if the shrub suffers winter damage. It will keep flowering all summer, right up to a hard frost.

Phlox paniculata Candy Store series (Novalis). This hardy perennial is winning lots of accolades for its resistance to powdery mildew and other diseases common to phlox. Give it full sun and rich, well-drained soil and you'll be rewarded with a nonstop cascade of sweetly fragrant blooms that should last well into fall. The series is available in four hot colors — 'Coral Creme Drop,' 'Cotton Candy,' 'Bubblegum Pink' and 'Grape Lollipop.'

Begonia boliviensis 'Bonfire' (Anthony Tesselaar). Unlike other begonias that prefer cool, shady spots, 'Bonfire' can take heat and full sun and still bloom from early summer till frost. Fully half of the plant should be covered with blooms for most of the summer. It produces masses of pendulum-shaped, orange-red flowers that spill out of containers and hanging baskets. It was introduced about four years ago and remains one of Schwartz's favorites. "It's still the best series out there," he says. "I think it's still underused."

Euphorbia 'Breathless Blush' (Ball Horticulture). This heat-tolerant new annual is similar to the popular 'Diamond Frost' euphorbia that was introduced a couple of years ago, but it has red-flushed leaves and pinkish flowers instead of white. It has a tight, mounded growth habit and stays fairly small — just 8 to 12 inches tall.

African marigold Taishan series (Pan American Seed Co.). After a limited release last year, this highly

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floriferous dwarf marigold will be widely available this spring. It comes in two colors — gold and orange. "I'm almost embarrassed to say I love a marigold," Schwartz says. It will do OK in a container, he says, "but it does best as a bedding plant — then it's just fantastic."

Gomphrena 'Fireworks' (Pan American). This new globe amaranth features hot pink blooms tinged with yellow that sit atop strong, tall stems. Give this guy room to grow. "It got to be 4 feet tall in my garden," Schwartz says. "It's quite sturdy in the landscape." This fiery annual "continues to flower and flower and flower," he says. "It really doesn't need to be deadheaded and it's great as a cut flower."

Lantana 'Lucky Sunrise Rose' (Ball Horticulture). Here's another brightly colored annual that loves the heat and does particularly well in containers. Butterflies and hummingbirds love lantana.

Petunia 'Rhythm and Blues' (Ball Horticulture). This showy new exclusive from Home Depot offers deep blue blooms with white edging. "Each flower is exactly the same," Schwartz says. "It's very consistently colored." It's more compact and less aggressive than the popular Wave series of petunias, he says.

Geranium 'Calliope Dark Red' (Syngenta Flowers). What's not to love about an old-fashioned velvety red geranium? "It has a semicascading habit, so it looks great in containers and baskets," Schwartz says. "It sends out a lot of flowers, with nice dark green foliage." It's easy to find, too. "It's pretty much available everywhere," he says, including Home Depot, Lowe's and Costco.

Petunia 'Pretty Much Picasso' (Proven Winners). We'll end with an annual that features blooms in the typically wild color combinations we've come to expect from Schwartz — violet interiors and chartreuse edges, with dark purple veins radiating from the center of each flower. "It's such a novelty," he says. But it gets a little floppy, so grow this hot little number in a container or hanging basket.

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