

Swoon season challenge: Finding love that will last

Winter-weary gardeners can't help but succumb to the lure of new plants. Here are a few to melt, not break, your heart



Black Velvet Petunia from Ball Horticultural Company . (January 6, 2011)

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Bright, inviting catalogs and e-newsletters sparkle in our eyes. Short, gloomy, gray days weaken our resistance. Fading memories dim our judgment.

And then they bring out the big gun: the word "new."

That adjective has the power to melt **the brain** and weaken the resolve of even the wisest gardener, the one who labels everything, keeps careful records of sun, soil and diseases, infallibly rotates crops and makes a plan every year.

No matter how many full-sun plants have failed in part-sun places, no matter how many high-maintenance divas have wilted with August neglect, no matter how many hard lessons we've learned, every one of us will fall for some delectable-sounding new sensation this spring.

our eyes over the next few months. Steel yourself. The more you remember the realities of your own garden, the more questions you ask to make sure you've got a match, the longer a new introduction has been tested in conditions most like ours, the more likely it will be a lasting treasure rather than a brief bauble.

Annual flower

Black Velvet petunia (*Petunia x hybrida* "Balpevac"): Put a little goth in your garden with what Ball Horticultural claims is the world's first true black petunia (although in full sunlight, at a certain angle, you can see deep maroon undertones). Black Velvet would be a real statement alone in a container, or as a contrast mixed with lighter foliage or flowers. But like all "black" plants it is most effective used in moderation in carefully planned designs. Likely to be widely available in catalogs and garden centers. Information: simplybeautifulgardens.com

Heirloom tomato

"Orange Icicle" tomato (*Lycopersicon esculentum* "Orange Icicle"): One of a group of varieties bred in Ukraine, this sunset-colored long, oval meaty paste tomato is described as having a sweet flavor with strong citrus overtones and relatively few seeds. Indeterminate (meaning the plant is capable of bearing tomatoes through the growing season). Info: Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds, rareseeds.com

Hybrid tomato

"Mountain Magic" tomato (*Lycopersicon esculentum* "Mountain Magic"): This tomato was bred at North Carolina State University especially for resistance to the troublesome fungus diseases early blight and late blight, as well as to cracking. A cross between a slicing and grape tomato, it has 1 1/2- to 2-inch diameter fruits on a compact indeterminate plant. Info and orders: Burpee, burpee.com; Tomato Growers Supply Co., tomatogrowers.com; Veseys, veseys.com; Johnny's Selected Seeds, johnnyseeds.com

Container tomato

"Lizzano" tomato (*Lycopersicon esculentum* "Lizzano"): Good for a container — even a large hanging basket — this cherry variety, which spreads to only about 20 inches, was bred to be resistant to late blight. It's an All-America Selections winner for 2011, which means it is likely to be available in many catalogs and garden centers. Like "Mountain Magic," it's a hybrid, so don't plan on saving seeds from these tomatoes. Info: all-americanselections.org

Hybrid summer squash

"Limelight" zucchini (*Cucurbita pepo* "Limelight"): This early-maturing variety has a summery pale green **skin** and light, refreshing flavor. Pick them young and shave thin slices to toss raw in salads. Info and orders: Burpee, burpee.com

Heirloom pea

"Champion of England" pea (*Pisum sativum* "Champion of England"): You will need a tall, sturdy trellis for this rangy variety with a charming history that almost defines "heirloom." Dating back to the 1840s in England, "Champion of England" fell out of favor as more compact plants with heavier yields were developed. The variety was kept going by Robert Woodbridge, a gardener who inherited it from his grandmother in Pickworth, Lincolnshire; the seeds came from one of England's grand country estates. Woodbridge's seed stash was multiplied by the owners of the Real Seed Catalogue in **Wales**; they in turn passed a few along to Seed Savers Exchange, which has now propagated enough for sale. Information: Seed Savers Exchange, seedsavers.org

Rose

Michel Trudeau Memorial Rose (*Rosa rugosa* "Michel Trudeau"): Roses don't come any tougher than the rugosa species: disease-resistant and hardy to Zone 2, with shiny crinkled foliage and abundant rose hips. This cultivar has deep purple-pink blooms streaked with white; it will bloom heavily in June and rebloom sporadically after that. It's a largish plant, up to 4 feet tall; it is prickly, so don't plant it near paths — it's best in the back of a border or as a hedge. The Michel Trudeau rose has been sold in Canada for a year, but only now is it being introduced to the U.S. The rose, bred by Robin Dening of Brentwood Bay Nurseries near Victoria, B.C., is named in memory of Dening's nephew (and the son of former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau), who died in an avalanche while skiing. A portion of sales goes to raise awareness of avalanche dangers. Info and orders: Northland Rosarium, northlandrosarium.com

Vine

Sapphire Indigo clematis (Clematis "Cleminov 51"): With the deep blue of that Princess Diana/Princess of Wales-to-be-Kate engagement ring, this is a compact perennial vine, good for a container — perhaps even a large hanging basket — or a small garden space. Clematis likes a full-sun site but it also likes its feet cool with steady, moderate moisture, so plant a ground cover over the roots in the garden and mulch well in a pot. It's from Monrovia, which sells widely to independent garden centers. Info: monrovia.com

Shrub

Scarlet Beauty sweetspire (Itea virginica "Morton"): In June and July, when few shrubs are blooming, sweetspire has swooning 3-inch-long white flower fluffs like kitten tails on a plant that can grow to 4 feet high and wide. Sweetspire tolerates some shade. Kris Bachtell spotted this selection in 1999 at [The Morton Arboretum](#) in Lisle and it has been extensively tested there and at the [Chicago Botanic Garden](#) in Glencoe. It is more winter-hardy and tolerates Chicago-area alkaline soils better than other members of the sweetspire species, which are native to the Southeast. It's also being introduced by the Chicagoland Grows program. Info: chicagolandgrows.org

Ornamental grass

"Red Bull" big bluestem (Andropogon gerardii "Red Bull"): This selection of the native prairie grass, with extra-intense red color in autumn, was a new introduction last year from Intrinsic Perennial Gardens in Hebron, Ill., but was not widely available. This upright, clumping grass will reach 5 to 6 feet tall and needs full sun. Info: Intrinsic Perennial Gardens, intrinsicperennialgardens.com. Info and orders: High Country Gardens, highcountrygardens.com

Shade perennial

"Prince Charming" Solomon's seal (Polygonatum "Prince Charming"): Stems with silvery-green foliage arch over dangling May flowers like pearly bells. This variety, believed to be a hybrid between a North American native and a European species, was selected by Brent Horvath at Intrinsic Perennial Gardens in Hebron, Ill. It is adaptable from sun to shade and grows only about a foot tall, shorter than the native species. Over time, if it's happy, it will scatter the deep purple berries that form as the leaves turn golden in fall and reseed to form a colony. A Chicagoland Grows introduction. Info: chicagolandgrows.org.