

Spring Fling: Mysterious Blooms

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Black beauties, the dark side of gardening

By. Joy W. Kraft



The forecast is black this year for gardeners, but there's nothing bleak or foreboding about it.

Gardeners showed a penchant for dark blooms in 2010, snapping up dark purple and maroon violas, hollyhocks, tulips, daylilies and iris to add drama and contrast to pastel-heavy gardens. And a trio of stars in this year's annual picks are Horticultural Company's varieties that include black velvet, a truly black petunia; pinstripe, a dark purple petunia with a creamy star pattern; and phantom, a black petunia with a yellow star striping.

Of course it's too early to till the soil and plant. But it's never too early to plan a season-spanning garden blooming with a rainbow of annuals and perennials.

Though mailboxes get swamped with catalogues the first two months of the year, local nurserymen and women have already done their first wave of picking and buying and are waiting to see what moves.

Green thumb forecasters like the folks at Garden Media Group are saying "gardening with a purpose" has taken root in backyards, deck pots, even window boxes and rooftops as folks seek to grow their own food and create "green" getaways. Classes on growing fruits and veggies are filling calendars, and even big-city mayors like Michael Bloomberg of New York City are promoting digging and growing in schools and urban communities.

With vegetable gardening up almost 20 percent and community gardens up 60 percent over last year, growing food for the table is on the rise along with gardening of native plants, says Susan McCoy, president of Garden Media Group. So look for fruit and veggie favorites with an emphasis on smaller varieties that can be grown in pots and snug spots.

PERENNIALS

Choosing what to buy is far from an exact science, even for the experts, says Doug Young, in charge of perennials at H.J. Benken Florist and Garden Center in Pleasant Ridge. "If I had an answer to doing it successfully, I'd be a rich man," he laughs. "I struggle with the question every year. I have to order a good bit early, usually around October. When spring comes and people come in and shop, that's when I see how well I did. "Honestly I can't outguess it."



That said, the plant that has been named "Perennial of the Year" by the Perennial Plant Association is usually a good bet, he says. "It's usually a plant that has been around awhile and has had a chance to prove itself," so it merits being a hot item.

This year that plant is the *Amsonia hubrichtii*. It's about 2 feet high and 2 to 3 feet wide at its bushy maturity with predominantly blue flower clusters. "You get some bloom all season, but mostly in May to July. It's drought-tolerant and native to this area," he says.

Amsonia also gets the nod from Leslie Shimer, manager of the greenhouse at Marvin's Organic Gardens in Lebanon. "It comes out green and 'ferny' looking, then it turns blue and blooms turning yellow in the fall."

False indigo, the 2010 Perennial of the Year is near the top of Young's list. "There are several varieties with tall, straight stems and pea-size violet blooms that attract butterflies. It is easy to grow in full sun or partial shade and is resistant to deer."

Echinacea and *rudbeckia*, both part of the *Asteraceae* family, carry tall daisy-like flowers often referred to as cone flowers, and are on both garden experts' lists.

"They're great for attracting hummingbirds and bees," says Shimer, "and if you leave the seed pods on them the birds can feed on them into the fall." They grow in full sun and are also considered drought-tolerant. Black-eyed Susans, with yellow-to-orange petals and black centers, and purple coneflowers are two popular picks, though they are available in many colors and petal patterns.

Young also suggests *coreopsis* or tickseed, *Monarda* bee balm for sun and bleeding hearts, coral bells and columbine for shaded areas. Prairie blazing star *liatris* is also a Shimer favorite because "it even grows in wet and clay soils."

ANNUALS

The tongue-twister argyranthemum is the rave of Richard Doesburg of Thornton Landscape in Loveland. "We tried it in limited quantities last year and it was great." The variety he planted, butterfly, has bright daisy flowers all summer and fall growing to about 18 inches high and about 12 inches wide. "It even took freezes, not below 20 degrees, but the frost didn't faze it." It's also available in a white variety called Madeira that was shorter and rounder in shape.

Seed coleus is another Doesburg pick. "Usually coleus flowers, and I don't like that, but these didn't flower. Instead they just got bigger and brighter, and they can take the sun." Tapestry and Florida Jane are two popular varieties.

Dan McMurray, head grower of annuals at H.J. Benken, says the trailing vinca vine that's been around a couple of years is proving to be popular and suggests the Mediterranean vinca by Ball Horticultural. "It really looks good in a basket and holds up well."



Purple salvia is a favorite of Dan Perrino of Perrino Landscape in Linwood. Not to be confused with the psychoactive herb *Salvia divinorum* of Miley Cyrus' smoking fame, the purple stalked plant is an [ornamental](#) species, commonly referred to by their genus name salvia or flowering sage, part of the mint family. It's available in several varieties and bloom types. Victoria blue and blue mist are oft-recommended blues that blooms all summer and are drought-tolerant once established.



WHY GO NATIVE?

The big reason to buy plants that are native to this area is to save you work. "With the water and summer drought problems in this area, it makes sense to plant native," says Leslie Shimer of Marvin's Organic Gardens in Lebanon. "And they attract all of our good native insects like the parasitic wasp and lacewing that eat aphids and white flies, two big pests. Also they attract bees that we all know are in trouble." They repel the bad bugs they also help keep pesticide use at a minimum.

But just because a plant is native to the area doesn't mean you can just plop it in the ground and forget about it, especially the first year," says Dan Young of H.J. Benken Florist and Garden Center in Pleasant Ridge. For a plant to be drought-tolerant, it

has to be established with a substantial root system, and that takes one to two years of care — and sufficient watering — to get them strong enough.

For more information:

H. J. Benken Florist & Garden Center,
(513) 891-1040 or www.benkens.com

Marvin's Organic Gardens,
(513) 932-3319 or
www.marvinsorganicgardens.com

Perrino Landscape Inc.,
(513) 533-2300 or www.perrinolandscapes.com

Thornton Landscape,
(513) 683-8100 or www.thorntonlandscape.com

Top to bottom:

The black velvet petunia by Ball Horticultural Company is nearly black.

The pinstripe petunia by Ball Horticultural Company is a deep purple with a creamy star pattern.

The pinstripe petunia by Ball Horticultural Company is nearly black with a yellow star pattern.

Argyranthemum