

Black petunias, new globe amaranth available now

By Mariana Greene

magreene@dallasnews.com

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Black flowers are rare in the garden. When a hybridizer hits the mark, it's news in the plant world. Ball Growers showed off a black petunia to the industry last spring, to great acclaim, and the gardening public will find them in stores now.

"It's the first black petunia in the world," exclaims a Ball Horticulture press release about 'Black Velvet.' The company also has 'Phantom,' black with a pronounced yellow star, and 'Pinstripe,' though the company describes it as dark purple with a creamy white star pattern. The black petunias are available only as plants, not seeds.

The all-black petunia was created by mixing existing colors already on the market and using their pollen for multiple experiments until the breeder got the darkest color.

Some local retailers have stock now, with others reporting delivery later in the spring season. The sooner you plant petunias after the threat of a freeze has passed, the better. 'Black Velvet' will perform best in a large container and potting medium that provide excellent drainage.

Leslie Finical Halleck, general manager of North Haven Gardens, blogged her excitement about the new petunias and plans to feature them in her home garden. "I was instantly drawn to its deep, purple-black glossy blooms, over which you can't help but ooh and ahh," Halleck writes. "The upright, mounded plants are early to flower and have a tightly branched growth habit. 'Black Velvet' will grow to about 12 inches tall and wide and is a good continual bloomer through spring. It is beautiful in containers mixed with other early-color plants such as nemesia, bacopa, Iceland poppies, geraniums, dusty miller and even salad greens and cool-season herbs. Silver foliage plants such as cardoon and dusty miller are the perfect backdrop for 'Black Velvet.'"

I think it would look pretty in a container paired with broad-faced white petunias that have a similar growing habit. I would have to rely on a knowledgeable salesperson, though, to steer me toward the right white petunia for that match.

Jimmy Turner of the Dallas Arboretum, who oversaw the black petunia's performance last year in the garden's valuable plant trials, says that, like any other petunia in our deadly heat, 'Black Velvet' is not ideally suited for our climate.

"Hot weather took it out pretty early last year," Turner writes in an e-mail. "Think of it more as a long-lived novelty cut flower that just happens to have roots."

Try this

I noticed the 2011 Burpee seed catalog has a new, eye-catching globe amaranth, *Gomphrena* 'Fireworks,' available as seed. I did a double take last summer while strolling the Dallas Arboretum. I wondered from a distance what it was and beelined to it for a closer look.

Dark-pink 'Fireworks' does not look like other globe amaranth. Rather than a conical flower, it heavily produces what I can only describe as tufts of yellow-tipped flowers on 2- to 4-foot stems. Planted in mass, as it was along an Arboretum promenade, it was a showy pink from a distance and was even more beguiling up close.

Gomphrenas are an old-fashioned cottage garden favorite, often grown as an everlasting, a plant suitable for drying and using in arrangements because they hold their color. While I make dried arrangements for autumn and winter, I do not plant everlastings, as a rule. These I would grow for their show in the cottage garden; cutting them for dried arrangements would be an extra benefit.

The Arboretum's trials data show 'Fireworks' got high marks, including the Jimmy Turner-conceived 'Flameproof' designation for standing up to our summer heat. "Wow! Very large and vigorous with an awesome flower that never stops producing," read the trial comments. The data also indicate 'Fireworks' bloomed for 14 weeks.

I do not know if local retailers will sell 'Fireworks' later this spring, but other recently introduced globe amaranth hybrids have been readily available in past years. Meanwhile, seeds are available from several mail-order sources.

WHERE TO BUY

The following retailers report black petunias on the shelves; call before driving.

Covington's Nursery, Rowlett

Cristina's Stone and Garden, Frisco

The Flower Ranch, Keller

Grow It Land Designs, Coppell

Jackson's Home & Garden, Dallas

Nicholson-Hardie, Dallas

North Haven Gardens, Dallas

Repotted, Dallas

Order Gomphrena 'Fireworks' seeds from:

Burpee.com, 1-800-888-1447 (30 seeds for \$5.50)

HarrisSeeds.com, 1-800-544-7938 (100 seeds for \$14.05)

SummerHillSeeds.com (25 seeds for \$1.25)

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Photo: Ball Horticulture

Black 'Phantom' petunia with its yellow starburst can be planted in a mixed container with the newsworthy 'Black Velvet.'

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Photo: Ball Horticulture

'Pinstripe' is characterized as darkest purple, not black.

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Photo: Ball Horticulture

'Black Velvet' is billed as a breakthrough in petunia colors.

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Photo: Burpee

Caption: Gomphrena 'Fireworks', also known as globe amaranth, produces strong, tall stems topped with bursts of pink flowers tipped with yellow. Gomphrenas thrive in hot weather and tolerate dry soil. It is also an everlasting, meaning a flower that is dried for indoor arrangements.

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