

Echinacea purpurea likes well-drained soil

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DAVID HOBSON, IN THE GARDEN

What, another echinacea? How many do we need?

I try to keep up, but new varieties arrive each year like fall TV shows — old stories with a new slant. Like the TV shows, some stick around and some don't, or the rabbit gets them. New ones are taller, shorter, bloomier, even fragrant, and come with catchy names like Mac and Cheese.

I couldn't bring myself to plant that one in my garden because of the name; I've never liked macaroni and cheese. I do like Green Envy and planted it last summer. I found it on a remainder rack at the garden centre and I was surprised it survived, but it did sprout up this spring, but then the rabbit had a go at it. It's struggling now, but I'm hoping it makes it.

Echinacea purpurea, or cone flower, is a prairie plant native to central and eastern North America. The original plants are tough and hardy, but some of the newer varieties may not be as rugged as those old pioneers. Nevertheless, breeders continue to produce interesting plants. I tried Double Decker, a pinkish variety that produces a second flower atop the first. It did well, but wasn't reliable, then it reverted to white.

I have orangey Sundown and Sunset, and maybe Tiki Torch, but I can't tell which is which, and I have one called Fatal Attraction, but according to a note in my plant record, it might have died — aptly named, I guess.

I must have half a dozen or so plants scattered around the garden and just last week I added another. It was the colour that did it, a deep rose, with daisy like bloom. It's named PowWow Wild Berry. With a name like that, I couldn't resist.

In my usual backwards manner, after planting, I looked up the information on this one and turns out it's a 2010 winner from All America Selections. They say it has superior performance including a basal branching habit, resulting in more flowers per plant. In full sun, it grows to 60 centimetres (24 inches), blooms continually, and doesn't need deadheading.

To some extent, these are features of most echinacea, one of the longest blooming perennial plants.

To grow them well, plant in full sun and, yes, in well drained soil. They aren't too fussy, but soil rich in organic matter is their preference. The well drained part is important — think prairie. After planting, water regularly over the following couple of weeks, at least, but only enough to keep the soil lightly moist. Once roots are established, echinacea are drought tolerant. When the time comes to divide these plants, late summer or spring is recommended.

After reviewing the 2010 All America Selections, I may have to track down the other interesting winners. Among them is a harmless defanged snapdragon named Twinny Peach, red by a company that's been tinkering with genes. Apparently, the flowers, a distinct blend of peach, orange, and light orange, are butterfly shaped and don't have the jaws to snap. Maybe those genetic wizards can work on rabbits. I wouldn't mind having them around if they would only lick grass.

Another All America Selections plant for 2010 is Double Zahara Cherry, a zinnia that is resistant to leaf spot and mildew, a common problem with zinnia. It's a heat-tolerant sun bather with pale cherry flowers and deep green leaves, good for containers or as a bedding plant. If orange is your theme, look for Double Zahara Fire. It's noted that the flowers on these new zinnias remain attractive for impulse sales at retail stores.

Now, who on earth would buy plants simply on impulse? Nobody I know.

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