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Fashion forward flowers

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CTW Features

Casual sporty denim or splashy stripes: now your garden can coordinate with your wardrobe, thanks to new fashionable petunia varieties.

Petunias.

Yes. Those wan, faded pastels you might have seen in your grandmother's garden have been replaced with vibrant-hued flowers that can spread in a billowing cloud.

But not only are contemporary petunias more fetching, the flowers are also hardier, more expansive, easier to care for and have greater longevity, according to garden experts.

No wonder Ned Wilson says, "I've fallen in love with each one as I see it."

It's not too late this season to succumb to the petunia's charms, says Wilson, with Wilson's Garden Center, Newark, Ohio.

Although petunias can be grown from seed, Brenda Dahlfors suggests buying plants instead.

"I don't recommend growing from seed unless it's a hobby. It's really time consuming," says Dahlfors, program coordinator for the master gardeners program at the University of Illinois Extension, Woodstock, Ill.

Visit your local garden center and prepare to be dazzled.

"Plant breeders have been going crazy with petunias. You'll find blooms that are tiny to four to five inches across. Stripes, starburst, single blooms and ruffled petals; petunias that mound or cascade," says Dahlfors, who suggests looking at the new Petunia Shock Wave Denim.

(For the 2011 summer you can look forward to new black petunia varieties, including a black and white pinstripe and solid Black Velvet, according to Wilson who's testing them in his display gardens.)

In addition to color, you can opt for scent.

Go for darker colors if you want fragrant petunias.

"Purples and blues tend to have a very sweet scent," Wilson says.

Some petunias are also self-cleaning, which means you don't have to pinch off dead blooms. Read the plant label before making your selection.

Despite the beauty, fragrance and ease of planting, the experts suggest you purchase fewer petunias than you think you'll need.

"A single pot fills in [the same territory] as four or five pots of the older breeds. The petunias may seem more expensive, but most are cost effective. They start bigger and fill spaces faster," says the master gardener coordinator.

As an example, a single plant of wave petunias can spread three to four feet, according to Dahlfors, who suggests using petunias as ground cover or border plants.



Image courtesy University of Illinois Extension

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Feeding petunias adds to the plants' longevity. Use half-strength fertilizer whenever you water, Dahlfors says.

Then be prepared for a long and enjoyable season.

"Petunias have a wonderful lifespan," Wilson says.