



house and home

**GARDENS** | New varieties inspire fans of this growing hobby

# DREAMING OF COLOR

**Trade show for the garden industry gives homeowners a glimpse of the vibrant things to come.**

By **MARTY ROSS**  
Special to The Star

**T**he spotlight in garden shops this year is on color — including easy, long-lasting blooms, bright, healthy vegetables and great native plants. If you dream in color, your dreams are about to come true: This year's garden is going to be splashed with every color in the rainbow.

"Color is the magic word" for new plant introductions these days, according to Michael Dirr, a trend-spotter who was among hundreds of professionals swapping ideas and observations in January at the annual National Green Centre trade show for the garden industry in Overland Park. Dirr is the author of garden reference books and is an influential specialist in woody plants, especially hydrangeas and viburnums.

The emphasis on color applies to plants of all kinds: annual and perennial flowers, trees and shrubs. Gardeners can count on new introductions of adaptable, long-blooming plants for flower beds and pots, and of hard-working native plants that attract butterflies and birds. But color doesn't trump everything. Vegetable gardening is big and getting bigger.

Hybridizers, wholesale growers and garden-shop owners aren't just talking about trends these days. They're making sure gardening remains relevant in a busy world. Gardening is not just a hobby, but a lifestyle. Plants make your home look attractive, express your environmental awareness and provide fresh food for your table.

Garden professionals and home gardeners are eager to get their hands on new plants. Many quickly caught on to prolifically blooming calibrachos, which look like tiny petunias. There are 257 patented cultivars of them, says Chris Berg, director of marketing for EuroAmerican Propagators, one of the largest wholesale suppliers in the country.

Cherry Star from Proven Winners is "the hit of the year," Berg says.

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ILLUSTRATION BY GENTRY MULLEN | THE KANSAS CITY STAR; PHOTOS FROM PROVEN WINNERS, BALL HORTICULTURAL COMPANY AND CERAMO

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Angelonia AngelMist Purple Stripe

# COLOR: Pros lean toward perennials and natives

FROM C1

Cherry Star stands out for its snappy pink and yellow variegated flowers, heat tolerance and non-stop bloom. Calibrachos can be planted in flower beds, but they're at their best in flower pots and hanging baskets.

In a lively panel discussion about new plants, Berg also showed off the compact, trailing Vogue mandevilla vines, which are recommended for hanging baskets and containers. He described Supertunia

White Russian as "an artsy plant that goes with anything."

Justin Hancock, the online editor of Better Homes and Gardens magazine and an enthusiastic gardener

himself, picked Angelonia as one of his favorite annual flowers. He particularly likes the Archangel series from Proven Winners.

"I've never had bad luck with it," Hancock says. "Archangel has more flowers than any other Angelonia, it tolerates drought or deluge and it smells like sugar cookies."

Hancock's short list of favorite colorful and tough new plants includes native Baptisia Cherries Jubilee and coneflower Southern Belle. He grew the sturdy and showy chartreuse coleus Wasabi last year and declared it "great in sun or shade."

Landscape design professionals are shifting their mixes of plants toward perennials and natives, says Jeff Gibson, the landscape business manager for Ball Horticultural Company in Chicago. He predicts a growing interest in lower-maintenance perennials and native plants.

Water conservation is essential now and will be in the future, he says, and drought-tolerant perennials like Rudbeckia Tiger Eye, Gaillardia Mesa and coneflower PowWow are some of his favorites. Helenium Dakota Gold is "an unsung hero" for landscapers, Ball says. These tough plants are flashy at 35 miles an hour on Kansas City's parkways and boulevards and are nice up close in a home garden, too.

Annuals have not lost their charm, of course. Ball described annual angelonias as "the most exciting class of annual landscape plants" and the Angelmist series as "rock solid — it takes heat and doesn't need extra watering."

He predicts more landscap-

## FASHION-PLATE PLANTS

Plants took a turn on the runway last month at the National Green Centre trade show in Overland Park. Pretty and promising varieties (not all of them new this year) were stars of the show. Among the most interesting:

- Reblooming weigela Sonic Bloom Pink grows to a manageable 5 feet tall and blooms from May until frost. Sonic Bloom Red and Pearl also are being introduced.
- Two butterfly bushes, Lo & Behold Lilac Chip and Ice Chip, are dwarf spreading butterfly bushes (Buddleia).
- Lady Elizabeth, a tough, repeat-blooming white daylily, was developed by Kansas City grower R.J. Roberson. The flowers appear to be "diamond dusted."
- In spring, leaves of the variegated weeping redbud Whitewater have flashy, snow-white patches that light up a shady corner.
- Fountain grass Burgundy Bunny is a hardy ornamental grass with red highlights and bottle-brush blooms.
- Bright red coneflower Sombra Salsa Red proves that the days are in the past when coneflowers were only purple, white or pale yellow. Hot Coral and Sandy Yellow are part of the same series.
- Superbena Peachy Keen is a mounding verberna that blooms all summer.
- Home Run rose is bright red and carefree.



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Interest in urban agriculture is transforming city and suburban gardens, says Matt Bunch, horticulturist in charge of the Heartland Harvest Garden at Powell Gardens. He recommends all kinds of berries for home gardens. Serviceberries (Amelanchier Autumn Brilliance is a good choice) should be in more Kansas City gardens, he says.

Elderberries deserve to be planted more, too, and figs are proving to be hardy in protected sites in Kansas City gardens. Bunch recommends hazelnuts (Rode Zeller has purple leaves), and he likes thornless blackberries, jujubes, currants and Damask roses for their bright red hips, which are packed with vitamin C. They all flourish in the Heartland Harvest Garden, east of Kansas City on U.S. 50.

## RETURN OF THE NATIVES

The selection of pretty, hardworking native plants is increasing as growers respond to demand from gardeners, designers and landscaping companies. Forrest Keeling, a wholesale grower in Elsberry, Mo., grows more than 150 native perennials; it also specializes in cultivars of native pawpaw trees. Bohn's Farm & Greenhouses and Kaw River Restoration Nurseries are regional wholesale suppliers with extensive native-plant inventories. Among the top recommendations for home gardens are:

- **Perennial plants:** Bluestar (Amsonia illustris), butterfly milkweed (Asclepias tuberosa), aromatic aster (Aster oblongifolius), false indigo (Baptisia australis) and purple coneflower (Echinacea purpurea).
- **Grasses:** Little bluestem (Schizachyrium scoparium) and prairie dropseed (Sporobolus heterolepis).
- **Trees and shrubs:** Pawpaw (Asimina triloba), beautyberry (Callicarpa americana), fringe tree (Chioanthus virginicus) and witch hazel (Hamamelis virginiana).



PROVEN WINNERS

Baptisia Cherries Jubilee

ers will use ornamental peppers as foliage plants, because they are heat- and drought-tolerant. The colorful coleus varieties Wasabi, Sultana and Red-head also stand up to tough conditions without pampering and look sharp in drive-by landscapes, he says.

New plants have to work hard; they can't get by on their looks alone. "We're at an amazing crossroads," says Ted Spaid, a founding landscape architect at SWT Design in St. Louis who studied at Kansas State University and who specializes in environmentally conscious design projects.

In a discussion about what gardeners will buy in the future, Spaid said gardening will simply become more popular, along with an interest in urban agriculture, healthy lifestyles and beautiful and sustainable landscapes. "We have an opportunity to make a big difference," he said. "I'm excited about the next 50 years, and I'm going to have something to do with it."

Marty Ross is a freelance garden journalist in Kansas City.

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