



Kathryn Cates Moore: An ode to the petunia

By KATHRYN CATES MOORE / Lincoln Journal Star | Posted: Saturday, May 7, 2011 11:00 pm

Petunias are to other showier, splashy annuals what Walmart is to Neiman Marcus. Usually sold in six-packs like plain-label beer, they are among the cheapest flowers around, always on sale and long ago cast aside by garden snobs.

And through it all, this lowly flower has held its head high, even in the hottest sun, just waiting for a petunia revolution.

It is here.

The movement started about a decade ago with the "Wave," which has nothing to do with a football stadium cheer and everything to do with hybridizing. These sturdy, big-blooming petunias that came in shocking pink, deep purple and other colors bloomed all season and looked great trailing from a hanging basket or planted in a garden bed. They would spread but filled in and did not get leggy.

It was a new look for an old standard.

Petunias are members of the Solanaceae, or nightshade, family and have been around in some form since the 1800s. In the 1950s, a red velvety petunia came to garden centers, and companies have been trying to top that for years.

I think they finally have the answer.

After the Wave came Supertunias, another stronger, even flashier petunia -- a real superhero in the garden. One of the differences between the Wave and the Supertunia are how they come into this gardening world. Wave petunias are propagated from seed, but Supertunias are propagated from cuttings.

I have always had petunias in my garden. They were a favorite of my father, so they were a mandatory part of the garden landscape.

But last year I saw something that made me a petunia lover, too. At its spring seminar, Campbell's Nursery introduced the Supertunia "Pretty Much Picasso," which comes from Proven Winner. It had an electric pink center with lime green around the edges.

I couldn't resist. Planted in a window box with airy "Diamond Frost" euphorbia, those petunias showed their happy faces all summer long.

"Picasso" petunias were a sold-out success all around the country. So this year, more quirky petunias are on the market. "Phantom" is all black with a star pattern of bold yellow, and "Pinstripe" is black with a narrower star pattern of lavender.

There are even variations of petunias, such as the Potunia, a petunia-ish flower with a mounded growing pattern. Then there's the Calitunia, which has a larger flower but a trailing habit. There are double bloomers, ruffled flowers, giant flowers and my new personal favorite, "Sophistica Lime bicolor," which has bright pink and lime green flowers. Kept watered and fertilized (petunias are heavy feeders), these guys will stick around all summer.

But keep your eye out for tiny black spots, which may be the droppings left by a tobacco budworm that has been munching on your petunia leaves. It's one of the most common pests of the plant.