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Plant varieties should perform well in state

Mark Bernskoetter, Master Gardener

Q: I'm tired of planting the same flowers that I've planted for the last 20 years. Do you have any suggestions for something new and unusual, yet easy to grow?

-- R.G., Ash Grove

A: The growing season brings with it the chance for gardeners to plant something new. Many of the new varieties should perform well in Missouri conditions.

Here are several suggestions gardeners might want to consider.

Two great choices for showy hanging baskets and containers are Illumination Peaches 'n Cream begonia with abundant two- and three-inch double flowers in a soft spectrum of peaches-and cream shades and MiniFamous Double-Lemon calibrachoa (million bells), offering stunning yellow double flowers on trailing plants with good branching habit.

Versa Crimson Gold coleus, which can be grown in sun or shade, has striking bright crimson foliage narrowly edged in gold. The late-flowering plant offers extended performance and low maintenance.

Stand Up Red-Purple fuchsia is unique because it tolerates both heat and full sun, growing 9 inches tall with an equal spread with bicolor blooms.

Mesa Yellow gaillardia (blanket flower) delivers better plant uniformity with more flowers than other varieties. Plants are covered with bright, three-inch, daisy-like flowers that do not fade.

Big Kiss White Flame gazania (treasurer flower) bears bright 4.5-inch blooms that pop as they are held high above the foliage by strong stems. This variety grows eight to 10 inches tall and wide. Gazanias love heat and tolerate water stress.

Taishan Yellow African marigolds offer high-impact color on fully-branched plants. Mature plants grow 12 inches tall with a nearly equal spread. Like all marigolds, it loves full sun and is heat, wind and rain tolerant.

Easy Wave Burgundy Star petunia is an easy-care variety that bears abundant star-pattern flowers on 6- to 12- inch-tall plants that spread up to 3 feet in diameter.

Denver Daisy rudbeckia stands up to extreme weather with 3- to 4-inch blooms of bright yellow ringed with dark red. Plants grow to 20 inches high.

Cora Cascade Lilac vinca is resistant to Phytophthora fungus, which occurs in hot, wet conditions. This vigorous, trailing plant is covered with super-large blooms, loves heat and does well in full sun.

Three varieties of zinnias offer season-long color for full-sun gardens.

Profusion Yellow bears abundant two-inch blooms disease-resistant plants that reach a mature height

of 12 to 15 inches.

Summer Solstice has petite, daisy-like orange and yellow flowers that make a sunny addition to window boxes, hanging baskets or gardens.

Zahara Starlight Rose is a compact plant with superior resistance to both leaf spot and mildew. The 2.5-inch white flowers with a rose center stand out from the 12-inch plants.

Q: I spent at least \$100 setting up a garden last year, not to mention the cost of plants. That has really got me to wondering whether gardening is worth the time and work. Do you know of any research that shows the value of garden?

-- T.K., Republic

A: Ah yes, the age of question: to garden or not to garden?

As we wait for the soil to dry and temperatures to rise a bit, now is an ideal time to consider some of the many benefits of gardening.

In an era when many businesses are failing, garden seed companies are reporting record sales. One big reason is that more and more families are turning to vegetable gardening to save on food bills, enjoy high-quality produce and reap the health benefits that come from outdoor activity.

A report from the National Gardening Association estimates that a well-maintained food garden can yield about a half-pound of fresh produce per square foot, worth about \$2 per pound at in-season market rates. The NGA estimates that American food gardeners grow more than \$21.6 billion in produce each year.

It doesn't take a big investment to start growing your own produce.

You don't need to spend \$500 on a raised bed filled with artificial growing medium to benefit economically from gardening. According to NGA, in 2008 the average 600-square-foot food garden produced a return of \$530 on an average investment of just \$70.

Of course, you have to provide the labor, but even that has its rewards. The digging, hoeing and raking that go with gardening are great forms of exercise that can reduce stress levels as well as your waistline.

With fresh fruits and vegetables right outside your door, you might start eating a little better too.

The bottom line is not how you garden, it's if you garden. There is no one best way to garden as long as you do it.

Q: I used some pesticides on my plants last year but know I am hearing that doing so can be bad for bees. Are there any precautions I should take to protect bees?

-- L.K., Rogersville

A: We rely on bees and other pollinators for much of the food we eat. Because most insecticides are highly toxic to pollinators, I urge people to use pesticides with care.

Pollinators are as important to a crop as fertilizer. Without them, plant growth would suffer.

Populations of pollinating insects have been declining over the last 50 years, Reasons include urban development, monoculture cropping, human fear of stinging insects, and pesticide use.

We may not be able to get by without using insecticides, but there are some things we can do to use pesticides more safely and protect our insect pollinators.

First, try not to apply insecticides when plants are blooming, especially if pollinators are working those plants. Remember that even if pollinators are not working a field, they may be working the field margins.

Two, use insecticides with minimal residual toxicity.

Three, notify beekeepers with hives in the area that you are planning to spray.

Four, if possible, apply insecticides early in the morning or late in the evening, when insect pollinators usually aren't flying.

Five, if you have a choice between a liquid or dust product, use the liquid, which is safer for bees and other insects.

And finally, consider other control options instead of chemicals as part of an Integrated Pest Management program.

For more information about IPM, contact your local MU Extension office or see <http://ppp.missouri.edu/ipm>.
