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WHAT'S UP FOR SPRING IN LOCAL GARDENS

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As soon as temperatures started to warm up in March, eager gardeners made their way to local nurseries and home garden centers for all of the color they could find.

"Our customers were looking for anything with color," said Larry Marchand of the Garden Spot on Robert Road in Slidell. "It has been a long, dreary winter, and everyone wants to put some color back into their garden."

While LSU AgCenter horticulturists and Times-Picayune garden columnist Dan Gill said he believes a lot of plants may have survived the cold and recommends waiting a few more weeks before pulling them out, many gardeners don't want to wait.

Sherry Marshall, of the Half Moon Gardens south of Abita Springs, says that customers have been scooping up everything that's blooming, including hanging baskets filled with bougainvillea, petunias, verbena and lantana.

Marchand added that some newer plants on the market, including two Breathless Euphorbias, members of the poinsettia family, are popular, too.

Both are compact, mounded plants that produce a mass of flowers and make a nice alternative to the much-used Indian Euphorbia. Breathless Blush is covered with white flowers that have a "blush" of pink. If you want some red in the garden, Marchand recommends two other plants that bloom throughout the summer.

The first is the shrimp plant, *Justicia brandegeana*, a member of the acanthus family that works well in mixed perennial beds and borders. In this area, it blooms almost year round if you prune the tips. They spread easily, so plant them where you have plenty of room.

The second is "Little John," a dwarf bottlebrush, *Callistemon citrinus*. This slow-growing evergreen shrub provides medium-green foliage with crimson blooms resembling a brush. It grows 3 feet tall and 5 feet wide.

"The dwarf bottlebrush provides a tropical look to the garden," Marchand said.

The shrimp plant had been hard to find for awhile, but his nursery has a nice supply this year, he said. "The shrimp plant comes in and out of favor, but they always look good in the ground as an accent plant or on a trellis."

Many nursery owners have noticed that local gardeners are mixing vegetable plants into their gardens. Marchand said a new cold-hardy avocado is popular at his place.

"These can go in containers or make a nice accent plant in the garden," he said.

The Brogdon avocado is a self-fertile small tree that usually sets fruit by its third year. It is cold tolerant to 22 degrees.

If it is bedding plants you want, stop by O'Keefe's, just north of downtown Covington, where customers can find a huge assortment of begonia, cleome, petunias, columbine, salvia, vinca and zinnia.

"After such a hard winter, a lot of our customers are looking for light colors such as sky blue and yellow, but even white is very popular," Matt O'Keefe said.

Two plants that work well together in a purple-and-gold LSU-themed garden would be Verbenaceae *Glandularia Canadensis*, which is the old garden favorite dark purple Homestead verbena, and Gaillardia F1 'Mesa Yellow,' an Asteraceae that is a 2010 All-America Selections Flower Award Winner. The verbena blooms spring to fall and grows 6- to 12 inches tall, with dark evergreen foliage that is attractive to bees and butterflies.

Mesa Yellow is a hybrid blanket flower that produces a 3-inch bright yellow daisy-like flower. In full sun, they can grow to 20 inches and provide great color throughout the summer.

While in the past, zinnias have struggled with leaf spot and mildew in this area, both the Profusion and Zahara zinnias are doing well. "Profusion White and Profusion Orange were recognized as outstanding plants for Louisiana," said Allen Owings LSU AgCenter bedding-plant expert. "They are a hybrid between the old cut-flower type of zinnia and the narrow-leaf zinnias."

Three of the Zahara zinnias were chosen as All-America Selections bedding plant winners for 2010. The zinnia Double Zahara Cherry provides larger flowers and grows in full sun to about 12-inches tall and wide. Plant them 12- to 18-inches apart for good air circulation.

The zinnia Double Zahara Fire produces 2½-inch large, bright orange flowers. They will grow to about 14 inches tall and spread 12 inches.

However, one of the prettiest zinnias and a good plant for the novice gardener is the double petal Zahara Starlight Rose. It boasts white edges and dark pink centers with a burst of yellow stamens in the middle.

With so many great new selections in garden centers at this time of year, one could easily break the bank on new plants. However, according to Owings, the best recipe for a successful garden is a well-prepared bed.

"You should not put a \$10 plant into a \$1 bed," he said. "You end up spending more time and money than necessary and may not be happy with the results."

Owings recommends taking the time to prepare a bed by raising it 4-6 inches above native topsoil, adding proper amendments and providing plants with a good layer of shredded pine straw mulch to keep the moisture in and reduce weed growth.

"You can have a very good low-maintenance garden bed if you take the time to prepare the right foundation for your new plants," he said, adding that new garden beds should be tested for soil pH. "The time to test and amend your soil is before problems arise, so your plants will flourish once they are planted."

According to Owings, for general landscaping, the Knockout rose and the Autumn Twist Encore azalea can't be beat.

"The Knockout rose provides great summer color and the 'Autumn Twist' azalea is a beautiful new selection with purple stripes on a white bloom," he said. "It is the azalea that knows no season."

The 24 varieties of Encore azaleas were developed right here on the north shore by Buddy Lee, a Folsom native who now lives in Independence.

A few other plants recommended by Owings and Regina Bracy of the LSU AgCenter are:

Emerald Snow, a new, white-flowering variety of loropetalum with green foliage and a mounding growth habit.

Purple Diamond, a loropetalum with tighter growth habit that makes a nice shrub.

The Crimson series of azaleas from Country Pines Nursery in Forest Hill provides a bush with crimson-colored leaves. Crimson Majesty is the largest and matures to 8 feet; Crimson Queen is 3 by 3 feet; and Crimson Princess grows 2 by 2 feet.

Mrs. Schiller's Delight viburnum has tiny white flowers on a compact bush; it likes full sun and part shade.

Sweet Bay, a medium-sized native magnolia with nice trunk formation, has leaves with silver undersides. Plant at least 30 feet away from any structure.

Fried egg plant, *Franklinia axillaris*, is actually a small tree with blooms that look like camellias. A member of the tea family, the fall blooms are white with dark yellow centers, like fried eggs.

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