



David Robson: Planting seeds of excellence

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The year 2010 will go down as one of the largest classes of All-America Selection winners. Typically, we see three or four winners. This year, there are nine.

The AAS process has undergone changes in recent years.

In past years, seeds were sent out the previous year for testing. That offered us a chance to evaluate the plants in Illinois summers, and allowed the companies to develop a stock of seeds for sale.

Now, if the company can produce a quantity of seeds, it's possible the plants may make the market faster than normal.

That doesn't mean the plants bypass testing. There are still more than 30 test gardens throughout the United States where plants must perform through rigorous elements that nature throws at them from Maine to California and Washington to Florida.

The University of Illinois has a test garden at the Hartley Gardens in the UI Arboretum. Potential winners are tested side-by-side with industry standards. The gardens are open during the summer and fall; just look for plants with numbered tags instead of fancy names. Another close test garden is the Missouri Botanical Gardens in St. Louis.

The vegetable winner this year is Shiny Boy watermelon, an earlier variety that matures within 75 days with red flesh and black seeds. This isn't one of those small, one- or two-person refrigerator melons; this one can tip the scales at 20 pounds, so it will need room to grow.

If there wasn't a zinnia among the AAS designees, you'd think the gardening world was coming to an end. This year, there are three, but they tend to be in the same series: the Zaharas.

Zahara zinnias are an interspecies cross, which means they took two types of zinnias and produced something with the best traits of both. This would be like crossing a chimp with a gorilla. Plants, like animals, tend to stay within their own species.

With the Zahara zinnias, you get leaf spot and mildew resistance, the latter being the best thing since sliced bread for zinnias.

Double Zahara Cherry and Double Zahara Fire produce flowers with multiple, or double, rows of petals. Flowers tend to be 2½ inches wide on 12- to 15-inch-high plants. Plants spread about the same, and will fill in to form a mat if spaced 8 inches apart. They work well in containers, hanging baskets or planted in the ground.

Double Zahara Cherry produces red blooms with dark-green foliage. Double Zahara Fire produces orange to orange-red flowers.

The third Zahara is Starlight Rose, a bi-color flower with white petals with rose-colored centers. The plant matches the size and spread of its relatives.

All the Zahara zinnias can tolerate Illinois' heat and dry summer conditions. You'll probably be able to buy plants this spring or start your own with seeds, waiting about two months before the plants start blooming until killed by frost.

We have another Viola winner, and this one has a name a mile long. Endurio Sky Blue Martien is a three-quarter-inch blue flower with tinges of purple on the outer petals that become more pronounced as the flower ages.

The violas are supposed to be winter-hardy in our climates if planted early enough in the fall to become established before temperatures plummet. Don't always buy the hype.

Violas and pansies need to be well-established before winter sets in, and then mulched if we have no snow and zero-degree temperatures. In most years, the plants die either from the cold or the drying winds blowing across their leaves.

That doesn't mean you shouldn't try. Just realize you might be better off enjoying the plants in the early spring and pitching them on the compost pile when summer's heat starts to do them in. That's when you replace them with zinnias.

Some of the first AAS winners almost 75 years ago were marigolds, and some of the best marigolds still on the market were past AAS winners. Only time will tell if Moonsong Deep Orange will follow.

Moonsong Deep Orange is a large American-type with 2- to 4-inch flowers and fully doubled petals. Plants will reach 12 to 15 inches and spread about the same, though like many new hybrids, Moonsong Deep Orange has great hybrid vigor and should bloom profusely throughout the summer into fall.

The marigolds and zinnias make excellent cut flowers, though you're not cutting them for their aroma. The latter doesn't have much of one, and the former can be somewhat offensive.

Violas look good in little bottles or old-fashioned lapel posy holders.

Next week, we'll look at the last three AAS winners.

David Robson is a horticulture educator for the University of Illinois Extension. For more gardening information or for your local extension unit office, go to www.extension.uiuc.edu/mg.

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