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Ball Horticultural Co.

Published Thursday April 7, 2011

Big fun

By Laura Drotleff
 CTW Features

« Living

The hardy "Luna Rose" hibiscus produces plate-sized flowers.
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Every year, Angela Eichorn's moonflowers (*Ipomoea alba*) put on such a show in her Algona, Iowa, garden that she makes sure to harvest the seeds they produce. The following spring, she shares them with friends.

"The blossoms are very large and white, only opening at night," Eichorn said. "The fragrance is very sweet. So if you are a night owl or an early riser, you will get a kick out of these."

Gardeners like to boast about plants. Whether it's an enormous sunflower or the beefiest tomato ever, we all enjoy swapping stories about our prize plants.

Big Plant Rules

Large specimen plantings should be used as focal points to capture the eye, drawing visitors into the garden to discover the mysteries there, said Bill Calkins, business manager for Ball Horticultural Co. in West Chicago, Ill. But the garden's size is an important consideration for where and what to plant.

"Plants that are too large will make the garden seem smaller," Calkins said. "The main thing to consider is the plant's mature size. Something you buy in a small pot could soon become a monster. So be sure to consult the tag, as well as garden center staff, to make sure you know how large the plant will get and in what time period."

In small landscapes, there really is such a thing as too much of a good thing.

"Too many large plants will overwhelm the space," Calkins said, "and the shade they create could cause challenges for other plants. Space out large specimens and use them for a reason — whether that's height, eye candy or to create a destination in your garden."

Likewise, in a large landscape, plants can get lost, so planting en masse will increase the impact, said Dan Heims, a breeder of perennial plants in Canby, Ore. Heims said the use of unusual large plants is the foundation for developing an interesting garden.

Gardener Kate Knight of Northville, Mich., accomplished this a few years ago when she planted three large pots of a plant tagged as Golden Glow, which she found at a nearby farmers' market.

"They are tough, rugged-looking and impressive at up to 8 feet tall," Knight says. "My daughter Eleanor identified them only last summer as green-headed coneflower (*Rudbeckia laciniata*). They're native to Michigan, and a perfect accompaniment to sedum and other echinacea in a New American cottage garden landscape."

The Value Of Plants

Large specimen plantings act as the exclamation point of a garden landscape, maximizing space vertically, but it's important to use a variety of different-sized material to add interest at every height, Heims said.

"Your eye follows lines in the garden, sweeping up to tallest item, then sweeping down," he said. "If you have only 36-inch-tall items in your garden, the eye really doesn't have a place to go."

Heims aims to develop gardens with constant color and texture for year-round interest. He is an admirer of coral bells (*heuchera*) for the way they provide appeal in the off-season with evergreen leaves. In the summer, their tall flower spikes offer bursts of bright color with added value in cut flower arrangements.

"In a smaller garden, everything has to earn its keep," he said. "If a plant only flowers for a couple of weeks, that's just not enough. The more attributes that can be compiled in a single plant — be it evergreen foliage, cut flowers, long-lasting color, reblooming flowers or plant hardiness — the better chance it has to stay in the garden. If it fails, it's out of there."

Bigger not Better

It's true that large, unusual plant specimens are dramatic and make a statement, but not all gardeners have the luxury of unlimited outdoor living space.

In smaller landscapes, giant container plants can become a centerpiece that offers constant, reblooming color and interest. Ball Horticultural Co.'s "Dragon Wing" begonia is a longstanding favorite that never ceases to amaze, Calkins said.

Ball's new "Gryphon" begonia features dark, silver foliage and a uniform growing habit, making it a great specimen plant for shade and part-shade areas. A bonus is that it can be moved inside during colder months — performing just as well as an indoor plant.

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