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Gardens go darkBy Dawn Klingensmith
CTW FEATURES

Having a "black thumb" can take on a whole new meaning.

That's because black and near-black plants are gaining in popularity — so much so that the new Black Velvet petunia, unveiled last spring, has been dubbed the most talked-about plant in 2011.

Ball Horticultural Co. claims its Black Velvet is the first all-black petunia and has been aggressively promoting the novelty.

"Everybody wants to be the first on their block with a hot new plant," said Ball's Bill Calkins. "Like a little black dress or a black leather jacket, black goes with everything," he said on a YouTube video, talking up the merits of the petunia as "part of a fun, awesome mixed basket."

A few years ago, chartreuse plants that seemed to glow from within enjoyed their star turn as the must-have color among serious gardeners. This season's darlings happen to be black. Novelty is just one of the virtues this color offers gardeners.

In nature, the color black does not recede into the background.

Landscape designers use black plants for impact, said Pat Gillette, senior manager of Wheat's Landscape in Vienna, Va.

Yet black is not a show-stealer. An excellent color for contrast, "black can really help another color, like orange or pale pink, pop out in the landscape," said Amy Stewart, a contributing editor to Fine Gardening and author of "Wicked Plants: The Weed That Killed Lincoln's Mother and Other Botanical Atrocities" (Algonquin Books, 2009).

Stewart's book covers deadly botanicals.

"But as I was researching, I did find that people are really interested in black plants, even if the only thing that's 'wicked' about them is the color," she said. "These plants do not have to look like the 'Addams Family' garden."

In fact, black looks modern and sophisticated, especially in urban and balcony gardens, Stewart said. Some dark-as-night flowers — such as black pansies, Black Barlow columbines, Black Gamecock irises and Queen of the Night tulips — actually blossom a deep, dark purple or wine color.

Other black beauties include shrubs and trees, such as the Black Lace elderberry, which "looks a little bit like a Japanese Maple with its fine, lacy foliage," Stewart said.

"It produces beautiful sprays of pink flowers in spring, and the combination of the pink against the black leaves is really extraordinary."

Equally striking is the Tropicanna Black canna, an exotic-looking spiked plant that produces bright scarlet or orange flowers.

Black Mondo Grass is "low-growing clump grass used as ground cover, in rock gardens or as a border, or just for added interest because of its unique color," Gillette said.

Plant it around the edges of containers or beds to frame and accent your other plants, Stewart said.

Just because a plant is black does not mean it shuns the sun like a vampire, Stewart said.

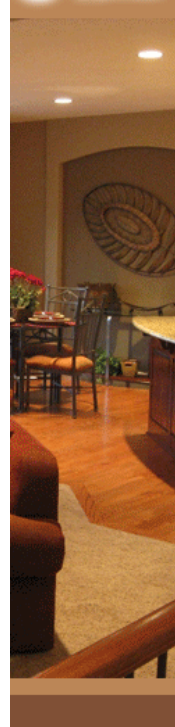
"Some of them need full sun in order to really turn black," she said. "Be sure to read the plant labels, and give them a spot that will really allow their darkness to come through."

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