



## Local experts discuss their favorite plants for spring

By Tammie Smith

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From Terra Nova Nurseries, Echinacea 'Mama Mia' has very large re ...



Misaka peony is a yellow flower with red flair.



Heuchera 'Kassandra' has multicolored leaves on one plant.



Caryopteris x clandonensis Blue Balloon Bluebeard is a new offeri ...



Monrovia Nursery says its new Bountiful Blue Blueberry has large, ...



Ball Horticultural Company's Pinstripe petunia is purple-based.

There is something to be said for last summer's prolonged plant-killing heat and drought: You get to buy replacement plants.

Gardeners in various stages of garden withdrawal are waiting patiently for the last frost, generally mid- to late April in the Richmond area.

Nurseries are ramping up, planning to offer gardeners more of this and that.

The choices include variations on some favorite perennials such as coneflowers and heucheras, attractive to gardeners because of long blooming time or interesting foliage. There is also quite a bit of buzz over an annual - a new black petunia unveiled by Ball Horticultural Co. at growers meetings last year.

To get the scoop on new plant introductions and trends, we turned to some experts, including:

✕ Elise Zylstra of Sandy's Plants Inc. in Mechanicsville, which supplies local garden centers and sells to the general public.

✕ Nicholas Staddon, director of new plants for California-based Monrovia nurseries. Staddon was a speaker at the Virginia Horticultural Foundation Home Gardener Day on Jan. 27 in Virginia Beach.

✕ Megan Lacey, perennial department head, Strange's Garden Center, and Sunnie Caldwell, greenhouse manager at Strange's.

All offered an extensive list of new plant products. In the case of Monrovia, not all of the plants may be available locally. The company website lets gardeners search by ZIP code for nurseries where particular plants have been shipped.

The American Horticultural Society in the January/February issue of its American Gardener magazine also has a six-page spread on notable new plants. Some trends they note: edibles being used as ornamentals and smaller, easier to care for shrubs.

Here's more of what we found out.

**Q:** What goes into developing plants for the retail market?

**Answer:** Staddon: "We travel all over the world looking for woody ornamentals, perennials, that sort of thing, for Monrovia. Plants, once they are discovered, they come back to America, and everything comes under a license so the Department of Agriculture knows we have these plants. We trial them and evaluate them. Part of the whole evaluation program is really figuring out whether we can grow them or not. We might have a beautiful plant, but sometimes they are very hard to propagate.

"We produce plants by seed, by division, by grafting a lot of plants and by the tissue culture process as well, the newest way to create plants. Maybe about 2 to 3 percent of our inventory is created in the tissue-culture lab."

**Q:** What are some gardening or landscape trends?

**Answer:** Staddon: "The minimalistic, or modern garden, or the contemporary garden, which is really about less plants and more in the hardscape. Container gardening, all those fun containers in England and the States. Using clematis as a ground cover, a big new trend. A lot of vines that we use on trellises or the sides of walls, we can also use those vines on the ground as ground covers. Clematis, in my book, is just a No. 1 opportunity. Fruit in containers. Folks who have smaller gardens. They have just maybe a patio. They can grow blueberries. With blueberries, it's always fun to get two varieties. Most blueberries are self-pollinating but, if you put another variety with them, you get about 25 percent to 35 percent more berries."

**Q:** What new can we look for from Monrovia this year?

**Answer:** Staddon: "A brand-new blueberry called 'Bountiful Blue.' Bountiful Blue is the first blue-leafed blueberry. She has these fabulous blue leaves, really large, juicy, sweet berries."

"Itoh peonies are crosses between herbaceous peonies and tree peonies. Itoh peonies were originally created back in the 1940s. They came to the United States, and one of the breeders has worked for years with Itoh peonies. His name is Don Smith. We've worked very closely with him for a number of years, so we have developed some exclusive varieties. They are large flowers, 6 to 8 inches across and, when the plant is at maturity, it will be 2 to 3 feet high, 3 feet across. Not only do you have a flower at the end of the terminal, but you have secondary buds up and down the stems as well. They have really strong stems so they don't get beaten down by the spring rains. On a mature plant that has been in the landscape for four to five years, you can have 40 to 50 blooms on them."

Others: caryopteris "Blue Balloon," apogon "Midnight Blue," hydrangea "Invincibelle Spirit," paeonia "Mikasa"

**Q:** What's new at Sandy's?

**Answer:** Zylstra: "We have a lot of variety and new things. A lot of them are things that we've always grown, but we're growing newer varieties of them because they are constantly coming up with improvements. Some of them, they are just lines that are very popular such as the Echinacea, the native coneflower. The cultivars that have come out are just amazing, and they seem to get better all the time."

"There are a couple we have been real impressed with. One is 'Mama Mia.' It starts out red, sort of changes to orange, coral, pink. It's really pretty because you get this mix of colors or shades in the bed. Another one we've been impressed with on that line is 'Now Cheesier.' 'Mac

'n Cheese' is one that Terra Nova came out with a couple of years ago. It's macaroni and cheese orange. It's OK, but not great. They have come out with 'Now Cheesier,' which seems to be an improved one. It's got better branching, nice deep golden cheddar yellow blooms. It definitely does appear to be better than the other one.

"Native is becoming more popular all the time. We are gradually adding a few more of those. Anytime we look at the natives, we're trying to find things that do well here. Sometimes they may be a cultivar of a native and somewhat improved so you get better performance. If someone is a purist, they may not like that, but sometimes that's the best way to go.

**Q:** What about heat and drought tolerance?

**Answer:** Zylstra: "Gradually as we refine our plant list, we have been trying to look at that real closely. A big thing, as we add new varieties, is, are these plants ready to take the heat and the drought well? If it won't grow well here, why promote it? We would rather have things people are going to be successful with. We take things and try them in our own gardens to see who holds up well."

Others: coreopsis "Cosmic Eye," heuchera "Kassandra," hardy hibiscus "Torchy," aster "Jindai," nepeta "Blue Dragon," achillea "Pineapple Mango," pennisetum "Red Head," geranium "Purple Pillow"

**Q:** What do you expect to be in demand at Strange's?

**Answer:** Lacey: "I think that the herbs are going to be big, any of the fruits and berries, vegetables. I think we will see that trend continue this year. In perennials, Itoh peonies, which typically are from Monrovia growers."

**Q:** What about annuals?

**Answer:** Caldwell: "The thing you are going to see most in publications is the new black petunia. It's the only flower that's truly black that they've come up with, yet. It's actually made by Ball seed. It loves the heat, loves the sun, blooms all summer. It is very black.

"There is a new zinnia out, Zahara zinnia, which is actually a double-flowering zinnia. It is more heat- and disease-resistant than any other zinnia. We grew it last year - it was phenomenal. We trialed it but, this year, we have it for sale. It comes in an orange, a rosy color and white with orange center."