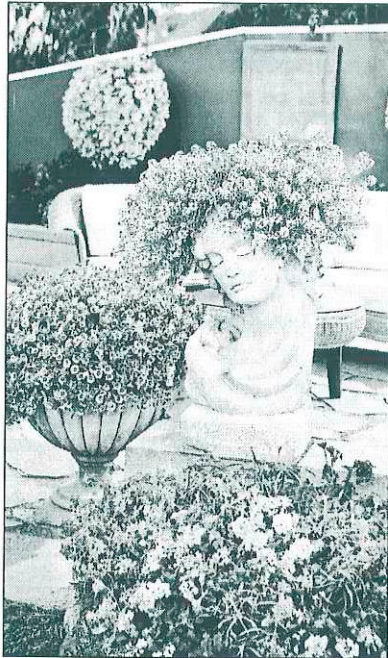


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Snow Princess at near right is a hybrid Lobularia from Proven Winners. It is very heat-tolerant and grows fast. The Easy Does It rose's color is described by Weeks Roses as being a "mango-peach-apricot blend" and the flower has a tutti-frutti aroma, too.

Proven Winners;
Weeks Roses



'New' decorative plants don't simply pop up

P.01

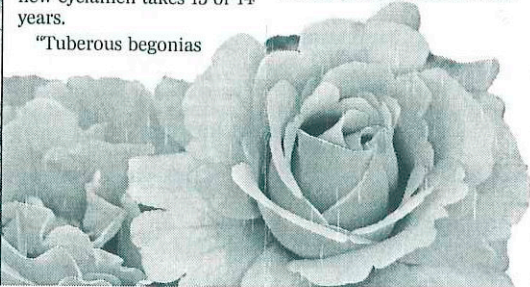
The new garden stars of 2010 will enter our yards with plenty of experience. They've been tested and tweaked for years, sometimes decades, before reaching local nurseries.

Burpee Chairman George Ball says the simplest plants, such as pansies or impatiens, take four to five years to develop a new variety. A new cyclamen takes 13 or 14 years.

"Tuberous begonias

represent a 15-year project," Ball says. "Six to eight years is the average for most plants. You start by making experimental crosses - hundreds if not thousands of crosses."

Ball compares breeding plants to raising thoroughbreds. "Plant breeders have stud books, just like for horses," he says. "They can trace a plant back dozens of



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darrington@sacbee.com

generations. It's unbelievable work.

"But everybody is looking for that holy grail, that one perfect, all-purpose plant. The perfect plant doesn't exist, but you try to come close."

Which new releases will grow well in Sacramento? We tested several last year in advance, and the (mixed) results are in.

We were wowed by a new red geranium and a fruity

floribunda, but some supposedly sure things won't make our winner's circle.

First, the good stuff

■ **Easy Does It:** This lives up to its name. Honored as the only 2010 All-America Rose Selection, or AARS, this ultra-easy-care floribunda from Weeks Roses was covered for months last spring and summer with orange-pink ruffles. (This display took very little effort on my part.) Plus, the compact, 30-inch bush can fit in tight places and is extremely disease- and heat-tolerant.

Weeks describes its unusual color as a "mango-peach-apricot blend," which sounds like a tropical smoothie. The blooms smell tutti-frutti, too.

How did they come up

2010

Seeds: Alas, not all may thrive here

FROM PAGE D1

with such a strange color? You'd never guess by the parents.

Easy Does It's mother was Baby Love, a deep-yellow miniature. The father was an unnamed cross of the salmon-red hybrid tea Queen Charlotte and the golden apricot, large-flowered climber Della Balfour from British breeder Harkness, which also hybridized Easy Does It. So a yellow mini, a red tea and a gold climber produced an orange-pink floribunda. Who knew?

■ **Fantasia Cardinal Red zonal geranium:** This is an amazing container plant. I planted a six-pack of these hardy annuals in a large, shallow pot in May, and they're still blooming in January.

Meanwhile, they maintained their compact size, staying under 1 foot. Their fuzzy, green foliage turned deep red as temperatures dropped, but the cherry-red flowers remained constant. (Although these plants are hardy down to 32 degrees, I did bring the geraniums indoors when temperatures dropped below freezing.)

They needed almost zero care - even the spent flower heads dropped off by themselves - and water just once a week.

Fantasia geraniums (actually a *pelargonium*) come in several colors, including neon rose, lavender, white, salmon, coral and pink. Plus they're deer-, heat- and drought-resistant, and hummingbirds love them.

■ **Snow Princess sweet alyssum (a *Lobularia* hybrid):** This has all the benefits of the old garden favorite but stays in one place.

Introduced by Proven Winners for 2010, this fragrant annual is sterile and grown from cuttings (not seed). While most sweet alyssum spends its energy on massive seed production (and spreads like crazy), Snow Princess concentrates on one thing: more flowers. This makes it a great choice for hanging baskets and borders. It tolerates both sun and shade, as well as high heat.

Other 2010 Proven Winners introductions that lived up to the company's name: Superbells Lavender *calibrachoa*, Superbuena Pink Parfait *verbena* and August Blue Skies *nierembergia*. Like Snow Princess, they were superior bedding plants for Sacramento summers, able to take the heat while staying compact and in constant bloom for months on end.

On the flip side

■ I was not impressed by Proven Winners' Supertunias hybrid petunias. Although they were "self-cleaning" (dropping their dead flowers on their own) and the colors were pleasant, these "super plants" seemed wimpy in my garden. They grew only 6 inches tall with a cluster of blooms on top of a super-skinny plant instead of filling in the border. I like my petunias beefier.

■ I also didn't have much luck with the Zahara Yellow zinnia. (Its sister, Zahara Starlight Rose, recently was named an All-American selection for 2010.) Although it was heat- and disease-resistant and needed very little water, Zahara Yellow grew to 1 foot tall and stayed there - with

one bright bloom on top. I prefer zinnias with more zing.

Most of these plants should be available soon in local nurseries.

2011 comes early

While the year has barely begun, I'm already looking ahead to 2011 - and more new roses.

If you can't wait for these introductions, you're in luck. Two local rose societies - Sierra Foothills and Sacramento - will host benefit auctions featuring roses yet to be released to the public. That includes the 2011 AARS winner, a burgundy-blend grandiflora so new that its name is still secret.

Also up for auction will be: Pink Home Run, an indestructible, shocking-pink landscape rose; Purple Splash, a purple-and-white striped climber; Colorific, an orange-blend floribunda; and White Licorice, a fragrant, yellow-white floribunda that smells like its name.

Among others, Easy Does It will be available at the Sierra Foothills auction set for 7 p.m. Thursday at Kroeger Hall in the Citrus Heights City Hall complex, 7119 Greenback Lane.

With many old favorites as well as new stars, the Sacramento Rose Society will host its rose auction a week later, at 7 p.m. Feb. 11, at the Shepard Garden and Arts Center, 3330 McKinley Blvd., Sacramento.

Both auctions are open to the public; cash or checks only. For more details: www.sactorose.org.

Call The Bee's Debbie Arrington, (916) 321-1075.