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HEADLINE: On Gardening: Sombrero Hot Coral Echinacea great for color and fragrance – Wire Home & Garden – The Sacramento Bee

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In case you haven't noticed the purple coneflower has undergone incredible changes or reformation when it comes to color. One such group is the *Sombrero* series. I recently took several containers of *Sombrero* Hot Coral to a live TV segment. Sure the *flowers* were staggering with their beauty but their fragrance was almost intoxicating. I just wanted to skip the TV show and sit in the car clouded with the heavenly aroma.

This high tech breeding, which is now bringing Echinacea varieties to the marketplace that make most avid gardeners go into a frenzy, has been going on for a few years. But only now do I feel like they are blooming with the performance we expect in Echinacea selections.

About a month ago I wrote about a recent All-America Selections Winner called PowWow Wild Berry that was unbelievably floriferous. But could some of the new color sections match up on performance. The answer is absolutely, varieties like *Sombrero* Hot Coral and Big Sky Sunset are perennials that will have you dreaming of plant combinations. I've only mentioned two varieties of two series, but a little internet searching will have you drooling to start your own Echinacea collection.

Sombrero Hot Coral has a compact nature reaching 18 to 24 inches in height, and is a prolific bloomer bearing dozens of *flowers* on thick sturdy stems. It has an equal spread thus forming a picturesque tight mound. The *flower* colors really are a deep dark coral/orange color and like most Echinacea will prove to be a tasty treat for bees and butterflies. There are four colors in the *Sombrero* series including another favorite called Salsa Red.

The Big Sky series has been around a little longer. These are slightly taller reaching 30 inches in height and width. In the Big Sky series you will find 7 colors with Sunset, Sundown and Twilight being the favorites.

Echinacea comes from the word meaning hedgehog or sea urchin and these cones of the new *flowers* really give you a clear image of how that name came about. These will be great for feeding songbirds as well as lending texture in the vase.

To grow your Echinacea choose a site in full sun for best *flower* performance. While the soil need not be luxuriantly fertile, if it takes a pick axe and a lot of muscle to break apart, plan on incorporating 3 to 4 inches of organic matter. While tilling go ahead and work in two pounds of a slow release 12-6-6 fertilizer per 100 square feet of bed space. Space your plants 8 to 14-inches apart. An informal drift will look better than a straight line once they are blooming.

These new orange, red and orange/coral type colors scream for some blue colored partners. Salvias indigo spires like Mystic Spires Blue, Salvia farinacea like Victoria Blue or the Perovskia atriplicifolia known as Russian sage are unbeatable companions. Apricot or Peach colored blooms like the Lanai Peach verbena or Landmark Peach Sunrise lantana would also make stunning partners.

Keep your eyes open for the both the *Sombrero* and Big Sky series of Echinacea – you'll want to include them in your perennial garden.

(Norman Winter is executive director of the Columbus Botanical Garden, Columbus Ga., and author of Tough-as-Nails *Flowers* for the South and the highly acclaimed Captivating Combinations Color and Style in the Garden. Contact him at gardenguy2000@aol.com)

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