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## The Grumpy Gardener

Get Your Garden Growing with the Humor and Wisdom of Steve Bender



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### Support Your Local Garden Center

Posted by Steve Bender, April 6, 2012 in Annuals and Perennials, Fruits and Veggies, Houseplants, Lawn and Ground Cover, Trees and Shrubs, Vines

The incredibly early spring this year has folks itching like they slept naked in poison ivy to get out and buy their spring plants. And while you can most always get the lowest prices at big box stores, Grumpy encourages you to look beyond the price tag and check out the quality and variety of plants being offered. If you do, you will find yourself as I did, shopping at an independent garden center.



This is one of my favorite places in the Birmingham, AL metro area -- Collier's Nursery on Old Rocky Ridge Rd. in Hoover. The sheer blaze of flowers sitting in neat-as-a-pin rows makes Grumpy's mouth water. Other great garden centers in our area include Charlie Thigpen's Garden Gallery in downtown Birmingham, Oak Street Gardenshop in Crestline Village, Andy's Creekside Nursery in Vestavia, and Myer's Plants & Pottery in Pelham.

#### How Little Guys Trump the Big Boys

Many years ago, Grumpy got his start in the horticulture biz by working at one of the most successful garden centers in America -- Homestead Gardens in Davidsonville, MD. We knew that taking on the big boys on price alone was suicide. You're just not going to undersell them on common stuff like lawn fertilizer when they're ordering 10 million bags. So what you have to do is offer the gardening public three things the big boxes don't.

1. Great Selection
2. Great Quality
3. Great Service

Homestead Gardens did that and thousands of people drove miles out of their way to shop there.

#### I Want Choices!

One of Grumpy's main jobs as a garden editor for *Southern Living* is to educate our readers about what great, new plants they should be buying and what tired, old plants they should be casting into the compost. And nothing peeves me more than getting readers all excited about new, superior plants for the South and then no one is able to find them. For example, here's one I really like.

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Despite the weirdly warm spring, my trailing 'Cool Wave' pansies are still kicking. Just ask Svalbard, my garden



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It's a new **sun-tolerant coleus** from Ball Horticulture called **'Wasabi.'** It grows big and bushy, about 24 inches tall, and takes full, blazing sun and heat with nary a whimper. It doesn't flower until September (a big plus because coleus flower spikes are ugly) and you don't have to water it every day. You can go into an independent garden center and look for it by name. Why? Because the plants have tags with specific selection names on them -- not the generic "yellow coleus" and "red coleus" tags that you find at big boxes.

Plants at big box stores are mainly ordered by people with zero knowledge of regional gardening. So they end up ordering the same old tired begonias, marigolds, and ageratums they always have, and much of the stuff won't even grow in your area. Grumpy can't count the number of times he has seen plants for sale at big boxes that grow like weeds in Los Angeles. Grumpy doesn't live in L.A. He lives in AL.

**Great Quality**

When I was at Homestead, we grew all of the annuals and perennials we sold, so quality was always top-notch. We saw the plants grow from seed to sale. Not every local garden center can do that, of course, but what they can do is buy plants from local wholesale growers who they know and trust. For example, many of the garden centers in the Birmingham metro area buy their flowers from Barton's Greenhouse & Nursery, a local wholesale grower. I've known co-owner Carol Barton since I moved to Alabama more than two decades ago. I can always spot her plants. The tags proudly say, "Alabama Grown."



*Various colors of 'Aztec' verbena at Collier's. Wow!*

But quality means nothing if plants aren't cared for once they're in the store. Again, this is where independent garden centers shine. If they let plants die, they lose money and their reputation. So they make sure plants stay in prime condition. On the other hand, how many times have you walked into a big box and seen whole tables of plants dying from lack of water?

**Great Service**

Want to know if the flowers you're eyeing grow in sun or shade, come back every year, need much watering, or have problems with bugs? Forget about asking at a big box. For one thing, there's likely no one to ask. And even if there is, they haven't a clue. Independent garden centers are entirely different. Their employees know their plants. They can answer your questions and keep you from wasting your money. And if you bring them a sample of a sick or dying plant, they can often tell you the reason why.

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Here in central Alabama, Easter weekend is usually a good, safe time to start putting out annual and vegetable plants. Last fall, I planted Brussels sprouts in my front garden and they sucked big time. So this year, I'm replacing them with peppers and heat-tolerant tomatoes. But to give the garden some needed color, I'm also planting flowers. I like combining orange with blues and purples, so here are some flowers I picked out.



For orange, I chose '**Profusion Double Orange**' zinnia. 'Profusion' is a cross between the big, common zinnia (*Zinnia elegans*) and narrowleaf zinnia (*Zinnia angustifolia*) and combines the best traits of both. It blooms continuously all summer, doesn't need deadheading, tolerates heat and drought, and forms a mound about 12 to 15 inches high.



*That's 'Adessa Bicolor' angelonia on the left next to 'Carita Raspberry'.*

For blue/purple, I turned to one of my favorite heat- and drought-tolerant annuals for sun, angelonia. I thought I would go with Serena purple as I had before, but then this new one with purple-and-white flowers caught my eye. It's **angelonia 'Adessa Bicolor.'** Can't wait to give it a try.

Wherever you live, make it a point to shop at your local garden centers. These are the small businesses that make it possible for gardening to be a blast each and every year.

### Win A Gardenia For Mom!

The Southern Living Plant Collection introduces its **Mother's Day Gardenia Giveaway** to one lucky mom. Sign her up, and if chosen, she'll win four 'Jubilation' gardenias that will fill the air with fragrance in spring and then re-bloom through summer into fall. Click this link to enter: [southernlivingplants.com/mothersdaygiveaway](http://southernlivingplants.com/mothersdaygiveaway)

The contest begins April 15 and lasts until May 8. The lucky winner will be notified prior to Mother's Day, so that our entrant can surprise Mom with a beautiful gift.

*The Southern Living® Plant Collection provides gardeners with innovative new plants designed to solve specific landscape challenges and to excel in Southern gardens.*



Posted at 01:38 PM in Annuals and Perennials, Fruits and Veggies, Houseplants, Lawn and Ground Cover, Trees and Shrubs, Vines | Permalink  
Technorati Tags: angelonia, coleus, garden center, Southern Living, Steve Bender, zinnia

### Comments

As a small, independent garden center it's always nice to see when garden writers such as yourself take the extra effort to mention us. I am in northern California, but appreciate Southern Living making the effort to support your locally owned garden shop, wherever they are.

Posted by: [trey](#) | April 06, 2012 at 02:11 PM

I thank you and LOGON (Locally Owned Garden Centers or Nurseries) thanks you! Times are tough and it is people like you getting the word out about what makes local nurseries so special that keep us going. Again, thanks.

Posted by: [Kat](#) | April 06, 2012 at 02:23 PM

I agree Grump!

Posted by: [Jean](#) | April 06, 2012 at 02:27 PM

Hey, Grump---you NAILED this one!! And you lke Carole Barton, too---one of my fave rave babes. Kudos for keeping it real, keeping it LOCAL, keeping it IN your community. This makes the fact that you are from 'Bama less annoying....

Posted by: [lloyd traven](#) | April 06, 2012 at 02:55 PM

The plants that I have bought from independent garden centers have always been much more healthy than the ones from big box stores that last for one season and then keel over. This year I am exclusively going with the little guys!

Posted by: [Katie @ Team Skelley](#) | April 06, 2012 at 03:05 PM

Collier's is the best!

Posted by: [Kim A.](#) | April 07, 2012 at 09:37 AM

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