

## The Columbus Dispatch

### GARDENING

# Beds are getting darker as black varieties multiply

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BY DENISE TROWBRIDGE

For *The Columbus Dispatch*

Black is now a perennial favorite - literally.

The color that has been a staple in fashion and interior design for decades has made its way into flower beds and container gardens via annuals, perennials and bulbs with black flowers and foliage.

"Black really is the big thing now," said Deb Knapke, a Columbus landscape designer and consultant. "People are fascinated by black flowers because they aren't something you usually see."

Burpee's Black Velvet petunia has consistently sold out in garden centers nationwide since its introduction last year, and the Queen of the Night black tulip recently made the list of the 10 best-selling tulips in the United States, according to the Netherlands Flower Bulb Information Center.

"They're appealing because they're so different," said Diane Blazek, executive director of the National Garden Bureau. "As in fashion, black goes with everything, and I'm sure that's how you'll see them used: in combo containers or mixed beds."

First, a caveat: With few exceptions, most black flowers and foliage aren't truly black.

"Technically, black is really a combination of red and blue pigmentation in very high levels," Blazek said. "The breeding and selection process homes in on the mutants with the higher concentration of those pigments."

Gardeners interested in experimenting with the dark side have a lot of options.

The Midnight Mystic hyacinth has deep purple flowers and grows 8 inches tall. The Black Scallop ajuga or bugleweed is a ground cover with deep reddish-purple foliage. The Phantom petunia has black



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**Pinstripe petunia**



petals with creamy centers. Coral bell fans can try the Blackout and Obsidian heuchera, which have purply-black foliage and white flowers.

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### Obsidian heuchera

The Hillside Black Beauty cimicifuga or bugbane is a late-blooming perennial with a light pink spiked flower. It can grow almost 6feet tall. Black Lace elderberry is another option, growing up to 8 feet tall with spiky purple-black foliage and edible fall berries, and pink flowers in spring.



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To maximize the striking visual effect of black plants and flowers, use them moderately and in combination with more colorful plants, Knapke said.

"Unless you back them with something bright, they're gone," she said. "You'll never see them."

It's basic color theory: Bright, light colors pop out; cool, dark colors recede and disappear.

For instance, if you plant black tulips, combine them with intense white, orange or pink, Knapke said.

### Phantom petunia

"Then people will really notice them," she said.

Megan Ehrmin, the display gardens manager at the Dawes Arboretum in Newark, suggests pairing black flowers and foliage with bright, interesting plants such as the Sweet Kate tradescantia, a spiderwort with chartreuse foliage.



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"These kinds of combinations really add depth and can be a beautiful focal point," Ehrmin said.

Also, plant black-foliage varieties in a partly shaded site, if they can tolerate it, to bring out the rich black color.

"In my gardens," Ehrmin said, "I have found that planting black-foliaged plants in full sun tends to bleach the leaves out a bit."

If the goal is to show off the novel color, "put them in a noticeable place such as in a container at the entrance to your house or by your patio," she said.

### Black Velvet petunia

"A black flowering plant or a black-foliaged plant is a good conversation piece," she said, but they aren't great if you need to fill in a large area. "I would stick with brighter colors to lighten up the area so it stands out from a distance."

Black varieties also lend themselves well to whimsical gardening "such as theme gardens planted with team or school colors," said Bill Calkins, retail manager at Ball Horticultural, the parent company of Burpee, which introduced the Black Velvet, Phantom and Pinstripe black petunias.

"And think of the opportunities for Halloween or weddings, where black is the color of choice," Blazek said.

But prepare to pay a little more for newer black varieties, Knapke said. For instance, buying three

Midnight Mystic hyacinth bulbs costs about \$10 at well-stocked nurseries - about double the cost of more typical colors.

"That is how the market works: supply and demand," Knapke said, admitting she not long ago paid a premium for black tulips.

Black varieties that have been around for a long time usually don't cost much more than similar plants in mainstream colors.

"We gardeners will spend a couple extra dollars for something new if it's something we like," Knapke said.

"We splurge; we're seduced by new stuff."

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