

OVER THE GARDEN FENCE: 2010 All-America selections winners

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All-America Selections is a nonprofit organization whose mission statement reads, "to promote new garden seed varieties with superior garden performance judged in impartial trials in North America."

The purpose is to test unsold cultivars. There are trial gardens scattered throughout the United States, with the nearest one being at Kishwaukee College in Malta west of DeKalb. Flower varieties are grown there for all to see.

First on our list of winners in the trials is an interspecific cross between zinnia species resulting in a cultivar resistant to leaf spot and mildew diseases. It is named "Double Zahara Cherry."

This handsome, symmetrical plant produces fully double 2 1/2-inch blooms in about eight to 10 weeks. Grown in full sun gardens, this darling plant will mature at about 12 inches tall and wide. It is heat tolerant, needs 12- to 18-inch spacing in the garden and will flower in 60 to 65 days from seed sowing.

If the gardener is equipped for it, seed can be sown indoors six to 10 weeks before transplanting outdoors into garden soil. All zinnias prefer warm soil, so planting out too soon could be detrimental to plant growth.

Another color of zinnia in this group is 'Double Zahara Fire' with vibrant orange-red shades, while all other characteristics are equal.

Second on our list is an Echinacea purpura or Purple Coneflower. This plant differs from all other coneflowers for flower color, branching and plant size. Gardeners will love the three- to four-inch deep rose purple flowers that retain color on the plant longer. It reaches 20 to 24 inches tall in full sun, blooming continually without deadheading.

To get this hardy perennial blooming early the first year, sow the seed indoors as soon as possible, January being the preferred time. Sow seed on top of germinating media that has been thoroughly wet and allowed to drain. Maintain 65 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit for 10 to 15 days. Within three to



Photo: Photo provided
 Double Zahara Cherry is an All-America Selections new garden seed variety.

four weeks seedlings can be transplanted. Grow on at 65 degrees, applying liquid fertilizer as needed. Plants thrive with few disease or insect problems.

Third in our list of winners is an African F1 hybrid marigold (*Tagetes erecta*) "Moonsong Deep Orange." The fade-resistant deep orange color seemed to take the judges eyes. In addition, the 2 1/2- to 3 1/2-inch fully double flower heads were spellbinders.

In the full sun garden the plants get 12 to 15 inches tall. Over the summer the old blooms get covered with green foliage, so there is no need for deadheading and plants look fresh throughout the growing season.

Sow the seed indoors four to six weeks prior to the last frost date. (We like April 1 for marigolds and zinnias). Cover seed and keep temperature at 70 to 75 degrees for five to seven days until germinated. When seedlings have two pairs of true leaves, transplant them to peat, fiber or Jiffy pots and run temperature at 65 degrees.

After outdoor temperatures are at 60 degrees, set plant, pot and all into its final growing destination. Avoid too much fertilizer or foliage will flourish with fewer flowers. Space plants 14 to 18 inches apart in the garden in full sun.