

Posted on Sat, Apr. 24, 2010

New varieties spice up containers and garden beds

Much of the fun of plant shopping in the spring is discovering new annuals that have the potential to be the stars of the garden. Purchased in small pots, they are an affordable way to play with color and textures, especially in container combinations. The new colors, forms, habits and sizes of old favorites can either have staying power or be a one-year flash in the pan. Either way, they're always an adventure.

Horticulturist Norman Winter, formerly of the Mississippi State University Extension Service, reports on a selection of new plants to inspire you, along with some planting and care tips.

Sweet potato vines

Ornamental sweet potato has claimed its rightful place as the ultimate spiller plant in containers.

It's also the best annual ground cover. If you think about the cost for a 4- or 6-inch container and then consider the amount of growth or spread it gives, you quickly realize no other plant can give you as much bang for your gardening buck.

New for 2010 are two colors in the Illusion series. These have swept trial awards all across the country.

The Illusion series brings a new tidiness to ornamental sweet potatoes. While they are vigorous they are not the rampant-running kudzu-like sweet potatoes we are used to. Their habit is such that you could actually use them in hanging baskets as a stand-alone plant. The result will be as pretty as a fern.

* Illusion Emerald Lace has bright chartreuse leaves.

* Illusion Midnight Lace is a deep purple that's almost black, making everything else in a container really pop.

The leaves of both varieties are deeply toothed, adding great texture.



Denning's is among the local garden centers carrying them, along with the Chillin series in Limeade, Blackberry Star and Blackberry Heart (heart-shaped leaves), and the Sidekick series.

Marigolds

Taishan marigolds were stars at the Beijing Olympics in 2008, and this spring you will have the opportunity to put them to the test in your garden, too. This award-winning marigold series gets its name from Taishan Mountain in China.

These are large-flowered African marigolds that are available in gold, orange and yellow. There is also a mix available, which is extremely showy. (Dutch's Greenhouse is one garden center in Wichita that carries the mix.) You'll find these to be rather compact, reaching 12 inches tall with a spread close to 10 inches. The branches are sturdy, easily supporting the large flowers, and they live up to flower's name, which means stability in Chinese.

Select a site in full sun for best blooming performance. The soil should be fertile and well drained. Tight, heavy, compact clay will yield less than satisfying results. If you find yourself with this dilemma, you can incorporate three to four inches of organic matter as you work your soil.

If this seems like back-breaking work, you also can plant on raised beds using a prepared landscape planting mix. You'll notice this to be a common practice around commercial shopping centers and office complexes. The Taishan marigolds should be spaced about 10 inches apart. Add a good layer of mulch after planting to conserve moisture and deter weed growth.

A little deadheading of old flowers will keep your plants looking their best.

Marigolds tend to be take-for-granted plants in today's garden, but they really offer a long season of bloom, making them among the best buys for your gardening dollar. They also can be planted at any time during the growing season. For a late-season pick-me-up in August, you could hardly do better than the marigold.

Euphorbia

It seems it was just a couple of years ago Diamond Frost euphorbia entered the gardening world and quickly became the ideal filler flower. The habit of the new Breathless variety allows it to take on a slightly more prominent role if desired.

The new Breathless is much like Diamond Frost, though perhaps a little tighter in habit. Diamond Frost reaches about 18 inches tall, and Breathless a little shorter, closer to 15 inches. Breathless Blush's white flowers, which are actually bracts, blush with pink. The leaves are a dark green with red tones. Breathless Blush also has the same controlled habit, reaching about 12 inches tall with a spread of 20 to 24 inches.

Like Diamond Frost, the Breathless varieties ruggedly perform in the landscape all summer, and their mounding habit works well in mixed containers.

For best blooming, select a location with as much sunlight as possible, although some shade is acceptable. Soggy wet soil is your enemy.

The Breathless Blush combines well with pink-flowered selections of salvias and burgundy grasses, while adding a touch a lime green-foliaged plants such as coleus or lamium will add zest.

For the long growing season, keep annuals fed with light applications of a slow-release fertilizer about every four to six weeks.