

TRIED AND TRUE

By Dan Gill

Garden columnist

As cool-season bedding plants begin to fade, the planting of warm-season ones kicks into high gear. For reliable performance

during our summers, these bedding plants must have excellent heat tolerance and the stamina to hold up through the long growing season.

Often, we find the best bedding plants through trial and error — and, to some degree, this will always be a part of gardening.

But success is more likely if you start with plants that have a proven track record here. That, however, could rule out newly released plants or varieties that you are not familiar with.

This is why bedding-plant trials done at the LSU AgCenter Hammond Research Station are so valuable to area gardeners. A major objective of the horticulture research at the Hammond Research Station is to evaluate the landscape performance of ornamental plants, such as trees, shrubs, perennials, warm-season bedding plants and cool-season bedding plants.

The following are some of the top-performing warm-season bedding plants for sunny areas, based on trials over the past three years. Now's the perfect time to plant them.

There aren't many Euphorbia bedding plants, but a few years ago Diamond Frost came on the scene. With its delicate foliage and tiny, white floral bracts, it provides a wonderful fine, cloud-like effect in the garden — much like baby's breath — and looks great all summer. Two new varieties, Breathless White and Breathless Blush are just as nice. Breathless Blush has reddish coloration to the foliage and pink flowers.

Of the angelonias in the Hammond tri-

als, the Serena series has been the best-performing. There are four colors in this series, lavender, lavender pink, purple and white. The compact plants grow to be 12 to 18 inches tall and stay in bloom until cold weather.

Early Bird Gold is a new selection of *Rudbeckia fulgida*. Found as a mutation of the extremely reliable Goldsturm rudbeckia, Early Bird Gold blooms a couple of weeks earlier. Its golden-yellow black-eyed Susan flowers are produced over a long period in early summer on plants that will live and bloom for many years.

Ornamental peppers are amazingly beautiful and resilient in the summer flower garden. And, the colorful fruit they produce is edible — although generally fiery hot. Top ornamental pepper varieties include Chilly Chili (a rare sweet ornamental pepper, good for school gardens), Purple Flash, Sweet Pickle, Red Missile, Little Elf, Calico, Black Pearl and the Explosive series — Blast, Ignite and Amber.

The leading zinnia for southeast Louisiana flower gardens is the Profusion series. This series was released in the late 1990s, but new color additions and cultivars with double flowers have been developed in the last few years. Cultivars now include Cherry, White, Orange, Fire, Apricot, Deep Apricot and Coral Pink. Taller type Profusion zinnas are Knee High Red and Knee High White. New double-flowered types include Double Cherry, Double Gold, Double Fire and Double White.

The Lucky series of lantanas has been out for several years now; it comes in a variety of colors. Bred and selected to be low-growing, the height is listed at 12 to 16 inches. Experience indicates they can grow taller, but, like all lantanas, they can be sheared back as needed to maintain the desired height. The best performers have been Lucky Pot of Gold and Lucky Cream.

Mesa Yellow gaillardia is a new hybrid

with a dense, mounding growth habit that reaches 18 to 20 inches. This plant is a perennial that's likely to come back and

bloom for several years. It will bloom first year from seed. Mesa Yellow is a drought-tolerant plant that produces 3-inch bright yellow flowers over a long season if dead-headed. It's an All-America Selections winner for 2010.

Senorita Rosalita cleome has turned up as one of the most outstanding new plants from trial gardens across the county the past few years. It is an exceptional plant. Reaching heights of about 4 feet, it blooms lavender-pink flower clusters from mid-spring through the first killing frost. Unlike other types of cleomes, this cultivar is spineless and does

not produce seed, so it stays in constant bloom. Pinch or cut back to control height.

Scaevola or fan flower has been around for a number of years. Cajun Blue is a new cultivar with outstanding garden performance that produces dark blue, fan-shaped flowers. The Bombay series of scaevola has been especially impressive at the Hammond trials and is available in white, lavender, pink and blue. Scaevolae are low-growing, mat-forming plants that look great at the front of a bed, cascading over the side of a pot or in a hanging basket.

Gomphrena, or globe amaranth, has a long history of doing extremely well in our summer flower gardens. Recent trends



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have been to breed more compact types. The impressive new Fireworks gomphrena turns that around. At 4 feet tall and wide, it is among the tallest and most vigorous-growing cultivars. The explosive hot pink flowers start

in late spring and continue until the first killing frost. It's a great background plant and provides outstanding cut flowers.

Evaluations are also done for shade-loving bedding plants. Each year a number of different caladiums are planted in trials. In recent

evaluations, the top caladium cultivars have been Candyland, Moonlight, Red Ruffle, White Delight, Florida Sweetheart, White Ruffle, Pink Gem, Mount Everest, Lance Whorton and Raspberry Moon.

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green thumb



ZINNIA PROFUSION DOUBLE FIRE



SCAEVOLA CAJUN BLUE



RUDBECKIA EARLY BIRD GOLD



CALADIUM FLORIDA SWEETHEART