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Trade show gives home gardeners a glimpse of vibrant things to come

Trade show for the garden industry gives home gardeners a glimpse of the vibrant things to come.

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Special to The Star

The spotlight in garden shops this year is on color — including easy, long-lasting blooms, bright, healthy vegetables and great native plants.

If you dream in color, your dreams are about to come true: This year's garden is going to be splashed with every color in the rainbow.

"Color is the magic word" for new plant introductions these days, according to Michael Dirr, a trend-spotter who was among hundreds of professionals swapping ideas and observations in January at the annual National Green Centre trade show for the garden industry in Overland Park. Dirr is the author of garden reference books and is an influential specialist in woody plants, especially hydrangeas and viburnums.

The emphasis on color applies to plants of all kinds: annual and perennial flowers, trees and shrubs. Gardeners can count on new introductions of adaptable, long-blooming plants for flower beds and pots, and of hard-working native plants that attract butterflies and birds. But color doesn't trump everything. Vegetable gardening is big and getting bigger.

Hybridizers, wholesale growers and garden-shop owners aren't just talking about trends these days. They're making sure gardening remains relevant in a busy world. Gardening is not just a hobby, but a lifestyle. Plants make your home look attractive, express your environmental awareness and provide fresh food for your table.

Garden professionals and home gardeners are eager to get their hands on new plants. Many quickly caught on to prolifically blooming calibrachos, which look like tiny petunias. There are 257 patented cultivars of them, says Chris Berg, director of marketing for EuroAmerican Propagators, one of the largest wholesale suppliers in the country.

Cherry Star from Proven Winners is "the hit of the year," Berg says. Cherry Star stands out for its snappy pink and yellow variegated flowers, heat tolerance and nonstop bloom. Calibrachos can be planted in flower beds, but they're at their best in flower pots and hanging baskets.

In a lively panel discussion about new plants, Berg also showed off the compact, trailing Vogue mandevilla vines, which are recommended for hanging baskets and containers. He described Supertunia White Russian as "an artsy plant that goes with anything."

Justin Hancock, the online editor of Better Homes and Gardens magazine and an enthusiastic gardener himself, picked Angelonia as one of his favorite annual flowers. He particularly likes the Archangel series from Proven Winners.

"I've never had bad luck with it," Hancock says. "Archangel has more flowers than any other Angelonia, it tolerates drought or deluge and it smells like sugar cookies."

Hancock's short list of favorite colorful and tough new plants includes native Baptisia Cherries Jubilee and coneflower Southern Belle. He grew the sturdy and showy chartreuse coleus Wasabi last year and declared it "great in sun or shade." The new Boost series of high-nutrition vegetables from Burpee Home

Gardens “really caught our attention” when he tested them last summer, before their official introduction this year, he says.

Landscape design professionals are shifting their mixes of plants toward perennials and natives, says Jeff Gibson, the landscape business manager for Ball Horticultural Co. in Chicago. Instead of annual impatiens, petunias, marigolds and begonias in corporate and municipal landscapes, he predicts a growing interest in lower-maintenance perennials and native plants.

Water conservation is essential now and will be in the future, he says, and drought-tolerant perennials like Rudbeckia Tiger Eye, Gaillardia Mesa and coneflower PowWow are some of his favorites. Helenium Dakota Gold is “an unsung hero” for landscapers, Ball says. These tough plants are flashy at 35 miles an hour on Kansas City’s parkways and boulevards and are nice up close in a home garden, too.

Annuals have not lost their charm, of course. Ball described annual angelonias as “the most exciting class of annual landscape plants” and the Angelmist series as “rock solid — it takes heat and doesn’t need extra watering.”

He predicts more landscapers will use ornamental peppers as foliage plants, because they are heat- and drought-tolerant. The colorful coleus varieties Wasabi, Sultana and Redhead also stand up to tough conditions without pampering and look sharp in drive-by landscapes, he says.

New plants have to work hard; they can’t get by on their looks alone. “We’re at an amazing crossroads,” says Ted Spaid, a founding landscape architect at SWT Design in St. Louis who studied at Kansas State University and who specializes in environmentally conscious design projects.

In a discussion about what gardeners will buy in the future, Spaid said gardening will simply become more popular along with an interest in urban agriculture, healthy lifestyles and beautiful and sustainable landscapes. “We have an opportunity to make a big difference,” he said. “I’m excited about the next 50 years, and I’m going to have something to do with it.”

Garden high-tech

The future of gardening is also online.

Suburban Lawn & Garden (suburbanlq.com), Family Tree (familytreenursery.com), Heartland Nursery and Garden Center (heartlandnursery.com), Soil Service Garden Center (soilservice.com) and many other local garden shops have well-developed websites and presences on Facebook. You can follow blogs, Twitter profiles and ask gardening questions without leaving your desk — or phone.

National brands also are linked in with plant information, ideas, gardening help as well as YouTube videos, blogs and photo galleries. Proven Winners (provenwinners.com), Burpee Home Gardens (burpeehomegardens.com), Endless Summer hydrangeas (endlesssummerblooms.com) are just a few.

Garden apps for smartphones and tablets are another resource. Botany Buddy is a thorough reference; Bee Smart helps you choose plants that pollinators prefer; Leafsnap lets you take a picture of a leaf and identify the tree it came from; and Burpee Garden Coach will send you text tips during the gardening season.

Product placement

Plants are only part of the picture, of course: Gardeners need tools and supplies.

- Pots of every size, style and hue will be in garden shops this spring. New pots made with particularly fine clay are tough enough to survive winters. Ceramo has a colorful, stylish line. Alec Jung, who brought a towering collection to the National Green Centre meeting from the wholesale company’s Jackson, Mo., location, says customers are interested in smaller pots these days. Strawberry-jar pots, glazed and unglazed, are popular for herbs, succulents, and flowers.
- Products using recycled materials have a lot of appeal. Flat Tire Decor’s line of trugs, pots and kneeling pads made with “re-inspired tires” has an industrial, urban stylishness.
- Birkenstocks are making their way into the garden. Birki’s garden clogs are upscale, water- and mud-proof footwear with the original Birkenstock footprint.

- Growing your own plants from seeds is an especially satisfying way to start a garden. Gardener's Supply Co. offers a new self-watering seed-starting kit.

Return of the natives

The selection of pretty, hardworking native plants is increasing as growers respond to demand from gardeners, designers and landscaping companies. Forrest Keeling, a wholesale grower in Elsberry, Mo., grows more than 150 native perennials; it also specializes in cultivars of native pawpaw trees. Bohn's Farm & Greenhouses and Kaw River Restoration Nurseries are regional wholesale suppliers with extensive native-plant inventories. Among the top recommendations for home gardens are:

- Perennial plants: Bluestar (*Amsonia illustris*), butterfly milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), aromatic aster (*Aster oblongifolius*), false indigo (*Baptisia australis*) and purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*).
- Grasses: Little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) and prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*).
- Trees and shrubs: Pawpaw (*Asimina triloba*), beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*), fringe tree (*Chioanthus virginicus*) and witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*).

Grow your own

Vegetables are good for you, of course, but new high-vitamin vegetables from Burpee Home Garden's Boost series are even healthier. Three new tomatoes (Cherry Punch, Power Pops and Solar Power); a bell pepper (Sweet Heart); a cucumber (Gold Standard); and a mix of lettuces (Healing Hands) were developed for their high concentration of antioxidants, vitamin C and beta-carotene. They will be available as transplants or seeds.

Interest in urban agriculture is transforming city and suburban gardens, says Matt Bunch, horticulturist in charge of the Heartland Harvest Garden at Powell Gardens. He recommends all kinds of berries for home gardens. Serviceberries (*Amelanchier Autumn Brilliance* is a good choice) should be in more Kansas City gardens, he says.

Elderberries deserve to be planted more, too, and figs are proving to be hardy in protected sites in Kansas City gardens. Bunch recommends hazelnuts (Rode Zeller has purple leaves), and he likes thornless blackberries, jujubes, currants and Damask roses for their bright red hips, which are packed with vitamin C. They all flourish in the Heartland Harvest Garden, east of Kansas City on U.S. 50.

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