

On Gardening: Rhythm and Blues petunia offers dazzling appeal

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Rhythm and Blues petunia may forever change your mind on flowers with picotee edges. This riveting blue petunia is a stunner and will leave visiting neighbors aching in jealousy.

You may be thinking petunias aren't the longest blooming flowers in the garden. While this might be true I assure you that no matter where you live in the United States there is time in your garden where petunias will thrive, producing flowers that border on the spectacular.

Rhythm and Blues is a mounding, trailing petunia, packing a bounty of flowers that have a rare icy blue color with a white picotee edge. It is a vegetatively produced petunia that will surprise you with both its vigor and longevity in the landscape. Though touted for the landscape Rhythm and Blues will also offer you the opportunity for creating extraordinary baskets and dazzling planters.

When choosing a companion think about using complementary orange African marigolds or white selections of tall salvia farinacea. Both also offer months of blooming performance.

Another new petunia that is causing quite a stir is Pinstripe. The notoriety is coming from trials where consumers and producers alike are ranking it among the winners. I'll admit I have never

been much of a striped kind of guy when it comes to flowers, but this petunia definitely caught my eye.

Pinstripe is also vegetatively produced and is wonderfully unique in that it is such a dark purple that it is almost black, and sports a thin creamy white star pattern. Black Velvet offers the same color minus the stripes. Its habit is a little more upright and less spreading. Consider yellow or cream colored large African marigolds as partners.

Though these are bountiful bloomers, soil preparation will be the key to your happiness with these new petunias. If you look at commercial landscapes you'll quickly note petunias are not being planted in tight, heavy clay. In fact, they are more likely to be planted in raised beds where a planting mix was used. If you are not going to use a planting mix take the time to incorporate 3 to 4 inches of organic matter and till to a depth of about 8 inches.

As you do this, add about 2 pounds of a slow-release fertilizer per 100 square feet. I prefer a 12-6-6 formula with minor nutrients, though petunias will never know the difference. Be sure to use a slow-release form of nitrogen. You will also need plenty of sun and of course supplemental water during prolonged dry periods.

Once you have planted your petunias, apply a good layer of mulch to keep those summer soil temperatures moderate and prevent rapid loss of moisture due to evaporation. Feed with light, frequent applications of a slow-released fertilizer about every month.

Plant them in bold drifts with a sufficient quantity to make a landscape impact. I've mentioned using them with African marigolds but they also combine well with lantanas, verbenas and salvias. Use them in containers and let them gently tumble over the rims.

Visit your garden center this spring and you'll be delighted to find these and many more great new petunias that jumpstart your landscape into the flower garden you always wanted.