

**The Real Dirt**

# **Petunia petals as smooth as black velvet**

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TRISH SYMONS PHOTO

Red rose stiletto by Toronto florist, Judy James, can be seen at Canada Blooms.



BALL SEEDS PHOTO

Pin stripe black velvet petunias.



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The black velvet petunia developed by Jian Ping Ren, of Ball Seeds in Chicago.

Will this pair of petunias be *the* hottie flowers to grow in 2011? I think so.

I've fallen head over heels in love with both, because they are absolute knockouts. Phantom boasts streaks of yellow plus a smidgen of pink, while in Pin Stripe, the pink is more pronounced. Yet what makes these flowers so special is not the stripey bits but that rich deep black. It is dark and intense. When I spotted these flowers bursting forth from containers in a greenhouse at Guelph a few weeks ago, I immediately got the urge to rush over and stroke the petals, because they look like black velvet.

Achieving this in a flower is no mean feat. Plant breeders have tried to produce a pure black tulip for centuries, yet the closest they've come is the popular Queen of the Night variety. And if you examine its flowers close up, they are in reality a very deep purplish red.

A breakthrough of sorts came along a few years ago with black pansies, but they're small and unremarkable when compared with Phantom and Pinstripe (there's also a pure black version called Black Velvet.) These three newbie petunias are the work of the talented Jian Ping Ren, who's with Ball Seeds in Chicago — and she's pretty excited about their debut herself.

“Lots of old fashioned hard work in the greenhouse. That's what it took,” says Ping. “It normally takes two years to achieve a new petunia colour, along with a few years of trialing the plants. But with these, we needed four years of development — and it involved using a mutant colour that is actually not related to black at all.”

Any of this trio would look great in containers paired with lime green sweet potato vine or the frothy new annual Euphorbia Diamond Frost. Plus something, perhaps, in pink or yellow, depending on the variety you pick. You can get all three at Sheridan garden centres and at Plant World in Etobicoke, as soon as our tiresome winter ends. Loblaws garden centres will roll out two — Phantom and Pinstripe. If you know of other sources, email me. I'll list them on my website.

I've passed on petunias lately because they're so horribly sticky — like a melting Popsicle on a hot summer's day when you nip the spent flowers off. Yuck. But this year, stickiness be damned. They're coming back to my garden.

### **Stilettoes on parade**

Tottering around in four-inch heels? Thank heavens I'm too old. But they sure are fun in floral arrangements. This clever take on the latest fashion craze is the work of Toronto florist, Judy James. She's currently showing it off at our annual flower and garden bash, Canada Blooms, which ends Sunday. Go take a look. I always think these wacky cut flower creations are the best part of the show. Info: [www.CanadaBlooms.com](http://www.CanadaBlooms.com)

### **Dig This**

There's a lot of gardening info available on the internet now. But how long-winded and boring most of this stuff is — often the work of amateurs (who can't spell or are just plain wrong). That's why I love Urban Scapes, just published by the Toronto Botanical Garden. Concise, well-written, full of information, this little magazine will quickly tell you just about everything you need to know about starting a garden in the city this spring. On sale for \$5 at the TBG booth (shared with the Royal Ontario Museum) at Canada Blooms.

*Sonia's column appears here every Friday. Her latest book is Incredible Edibles: 43 fun things to grow in the city. [www.soniaday.com](http://www.soniaday.com)*