

## New Vegetative Annuals

Dr. Lois Berg Stack, Extension Specialist, Ornamental Horticulture  
University of Maine Cooperative Extension  
495 College Avenue, Orono ME 04473-1294  
Tel. 207-581-2949; Email lstack@umext.maine.edu

Vegetative annuals exploded onto the market a decade ago, and the number of cultivars on the market grows every year. So many programs, so many introductions, so little bench space! It's tempting to grow some of everything. However, there is considerable redundancy among programs, and too much product diversity leads to management problems.

In some ways, national marketing programs have eclipsed local programs. That works in mass marketing. But ultimately, if your business is an independent local greenhouse/garden center, your customers look to you for *more*. They trust your professionalism, appreciate your fairness, value your service, and rely on your knowledge. That means it's up to you to decide which new vegetative annuals to grow, how to market them, and how to educate consumers about them.

If you focus only on what's new, then that's what you'll offer -- lots of new plants. But if you use your professionalism and knowledge to select new cultivars in the context of the garden trends you want to market to, you'll be able to differentiate yourself in a way that lets your customers know they *can* in fact look to you for *more*.

With that in mind, here are several exciting new cultivars that are truly worth your consideration. They're presented in the context of six gardening trends. If you market to these trends, then you might consider growing and marketing the cultivars mentioned.

1. Some plants are simply outstanding. Always go with the winner!

Ok, ok, perhaps this isn't a trend. But some plants are terrific, and build up their own following. Those plants are worth considering. *Argyranthemum frutescens* 'Butterfly' was introduced in 1994, and it remains one of the top selling Proven Winners®. It has gained a large and loyal following for a good reason: it performs well all season long.

Another plant in this category is *Scaevola aemula* 'New Wonder' (Proven Winners®, introduced in 1996). Finally, a white cultivar, *Scaevola aemula* 'Whirlwind White' (Proven Winners®, 2004) performs nearly as well. It's been a long time coming!

A third plant in this category is the *Phlox* 'Intensia' series. I obtained three cultivars from the Proven Winners® propagator for this year's trials, and all three are available for 2004: 'Lavender Glow', 'Lilac Rose' and 'Neon Pink'. I was not particularly impressed at first, but as the season progressed, these plants, especially 'Lavender Glow', became the highlights of the trials. These are outstanding garden performers, spreading into 15" x 28" mounds, covered with flowers until frost. Remember that those mixed containers need to perform throughout the season. In June, your big-container customers may not even notice that you tucked in a few of these, but they'll thank you in September.

2. Something old, something new ...

Old-fashioned plants are popular again. Everywhere I looked this summer, I saw love-lies-bleeding, snow-on-the-mountain and heliotrope. Some recent vegetative annuals are improved forms of old favorites. *Bidens ferulifolia* 'Solaire Compact Yellow' (Proven Winners<sup>®</sup>, 2004), really captured my attention in the 2003 trials. It's much more compact than older types, creating a spreading mound of foliage topped by short-stemmed yellow flowers all season -- much different from the open, floppy plants of the past. Although a majority of flowers on 'Solaire Compact Yellow' were toward the edges of the plants by the end of the season, the plants stayed tight and attractive in the middle.

A second old-fashioned favorite is ageratum, and the 'Artist' series is the best on the market. 'Artist Blue' and 'Artist Purple' (Proven Winners<sup>®</sup>, 2003) are well-branched, compact, dark green plants covered with flowers all season, well past the first light frosts of fall. Best of all, the flowers look good all season without any deadheading, making the plants much lower maintenance than the older types.

A third old-fashioned plant that has made big news in the past few years is coleus, or *Solenostemon* as the taxonomists now call it. Cultivars abound. Some of these "new coleus plants", like 'Mars' and 'Saturn', are old types that you may remember from years ago. They were not viable crops before the vegetative annual industry developed, because they required growers to hold over stock plants to take winter cuttings. Now, terrific coleus are available once again -- more than 100 named types are on the market. Look closely, as some are quite similar to each other ('Mars' and 'Purple Duckfoot' look the same to me ...). Your customers might ask for some types by name, as they've received considerable press lately -- Proven Selections<sup>®</sup> include 'Amora', 'Dark Star' and 'Life Lime'; Simply Beautiful<sup>®</sup> cultivars include 'Stoplight', 'Sherbet' and 'Chocomint'; 'Stained Glassworks' is a beautiful introduction from Flower Fields<sup>®</sup>. Many coleus cultivars are available both as part of registered vegetative annual programs, and from general propagators.

3. What's in a name? ... or, Marketing garden whimsy

Garden whimsy is Big -- gates, arches, gazing balls, tropical plants, garden fairies, greenmen, and on and on. It's a trend that encourages people to express humor through their gardens. This year's whimsical plant seemed to be *Perilla* 'Magilla' (Simply Beautiful<sup>®</sup>, 2003). It's hard to say "Magilla Perilla" without conjuring up the picture of a cartoon character. It makes people smile -- and that's part of what gardening is about. The plant itself is a good performer, similar to a coleus, but it's the name that makes it a marketing success. Another recent whimsical plant is *Cuphea llavea* 'Tiny Mice'. I loved sharing this plant with kids in our trials in 2002; it's available as a Proven Selection<sup>®</sup> (introduced 2003).

4. Two uses are better than one

Everyone likes a bonus. In our multi-tasking society, multi-purpose plants offer something extra ... parsley-the-herb is also parsley-the-edging-plant, and impatiens-the-garden-plant becomes impatiens-the-houseplant.

In the world of vegetative annuals, a previously underused genus, *Angelonia*, has become a star. It's a beautiful summer annual with upright stems and excellent branching, useful in the

midground and background of small gardens and also useful as the height and depth in large containers. But it's more than that! We took *Angelonia* 'Angelface White' and 'Angelface Blue Bicolor' (Proven Winners®, introduced 2003) to a commercial florist design seminar in September 2002, to rave reviews. 'Angelface Blue' was good too, but at just 15" tall, it didn't fill that cut flower niche the way the other two did at 24". Flower Fields® offers seven colors in its AngelMist series; 'Deep Plum Improved' and 'Light Pink' are exceptional colors.

5. Movement and grace are part of gardens, too!

Often, we focus on color to the exclusion of other elements and principles of design. More recently, we've added texture to our palette. Now ... it's time for movement! We have access to terrific grasses that add a whole new dimension to gardens and containers. Try *Pennisetum setaceum* 'Rubrum' -- you can propagate it yourself by division or by rooting stem joints directly in pots. It's a fast crop, a great addition to containers, and a beautiful contrast to coarse textures, yellows, pinks, and silvers. To top it off, it's a great fresh and dried cut flower.

6. Be scentsitive to your customers' needs

Yes, that's a bad pun, but scent is important in gardens. How many times have your customers asked for "that fragrant little white flower" (*Nemesia* 'White Innocence')? This summer, I was introduced to the "Peanut Butter Plant" -- kids who visited our demonstration gardens were constantly rubbing the leaves, sniffing, and giggling.

If you'd like to market to those who garden with all their senses, don't overlook the scented geraniums. These plants are members of many species of *Pelargonium*, and offer so many attributes that could be profitably marketed. They're easy to obtain (hundreds of cultivars are available from specialty propagators); easy to grow as long as you don't overwater or allow whitefly to overtake them; easy to maintain in the retail setting and in the garden because of their extreme drought-tolerance.

A second group of customers is one that has been difficult to reach through garden centers -- people who expendable income but do not consider themselves gardeners. They may appreciate beauty, but don't want to be bothered with plant care. They admire beautiful containers, but would almost rather have them empty. Scented geraniums are elegant plants that require little care. That makes them the perfect plants for these potential and hard-to-reach customers.