

The Top Ten by Honey Sharp

As with foods, so with plants. We all have favorites and may never abandon staples such as good ol'fashioned hamburgers and corn on the cob. When it comes to plants, the equivalent might be black-eyed Susans, hollyhocks and coneflowers. Still, fads and current trends infiltrate our many whims and desires.

In the days when we relished Campbell's tomato soup or raspberry Jello, phlox and marigolds took center stage. Today, one might seek out a tantalizing and tangy duck a l'orange or a tropical tangerine *Ligularia* called The Rocket. One significant difference: a fancy nursery specimen, at say \$7.99, may cost no more than a pot of black-eyed Susans. Not quite the case with duck versus hamburger. This is not to say that plant prices don't make one shudder.

Ah... fashion. Is there more to it than whims and desires often based on cyclical patterns? Just as those hippie-day skirts are once again a la mode, heirlooms are now all the rage—albeit with slight changes, some for better or worse. After all, who goes for an emaciated black coneflower that's lost all its petals or a rose without scent?

Still, sophistication develops with visits to public and private gardens, horticulture classes and tantalizing photos brought to you by glossy books, catalogues and magazines. Like a visit to Gap, the panoply of nursery specimens can make for a staggering menu. And, with today's intolerance for high maintenance and preference for the "latest model", why not look for an alternative to the fungus prone phlox (although we are told they are bred differently today) or the boring marigolds?

After learning from Greg Ward at his nursery in Great Barrington, Massachusetts that he offers 1900 perennial and annual species, it occurred to me that a good Top Ten, although somewhat arbitrary, might be called for. As a place to start, I asked myself: what plant might I miss were it not in my garden? I also asked Amy Loveless, the "annual chef" at Wards.

For Amy, her highest ranked annuals remain: coleus, salvias and nasturtiums. As she states: "The many colors and patterns of coleus provide variety; they act as a perfect accent to flowers." Among her favorite were names bordering and even borrowing from perfume and car brands such as 'The Flume', 'Splash' and 'Sedona'. "One of the most interesting facts", she added, "is that coleus is now being bred not only shade but for full sun." While heading towards the nasturtiums, a new

coleus variety almost literally hit me in the face: a 18" high and wide, loud, almost obscene, Christmas-colored version with streaks of shocking pink. Hmm...

What a relief to come upon my good old favorites: nasturtiums. Not too many varieties to worry about unless you start them up from seed. Who could imagine not planting them in the vegetable bed and later savoring their color, lemony flavor and smooth texture in a salad?

Among some 2005 candidates, Amy introduced me to *Euphorbia* 'Diamond Trust'. With its delicate, lacey white flowers, I could imagine it quite satisfied next to a tall, spiky grass or a silver begonia in a clay pot. Finally, among the salvias, the *discolor*, with its silvery white under-leaf and its coal-colored flower, promises to be a big hit. Such low-keyed annuals are not a surprise explained Amy. "People are going more for the pastels today."

When it comes to perennials, I have my own favorites. Having grown intolerant of fussy delphiniums and disease-prone monkshoods, my criteria include long lasting blossoms, good foliage for ongoing seasonal interest, proper behavior (no need to stake or painfully yank out), disease resistance, accompanied by nice fragrance and attractiveness to butterflies or hummingbirds. A tall order indeed!

For shade, my list will always include *Cimicifuga* and *Epimedium*. They couldn't be more different. *Cimicifuga* or Bugbane is architectural in shape as it makes a generous offering of long, candle-like white flowers that last through the fall. With its subtle green to purple stems and foliage, it makes for a definite presence in the garden bed. With its subtle green to purple stems and foliage, it makes for a definite presence in the garden bed. Most renowned—and patented—is 'Hillside Black Beauty'. With its dark purple foliage, it is reminiscent of a glass of Pinot Noir. Before I jump into *Epimedium*, I must mention another favorite: the native *Thalictrum* or Meadow Rue, a delicate almost billowy plant that will also self-propagate and looks great with *Cimicifuga*.

At the other end of the spectrum in size, is the understated, almost shy, *Epimedium* or Barrenwort. Its heart-shaped leaves, edged with a faint hint of ruby red, offers a lovely groundcover in the shade that will outperform vinca or pachysandra any day. At its peak in spring, its nodding, delicate pink or butter-colored flowers faintly poke their heads among the leaves. And, there is an extra bonus: *Epimedium*, given the right conditions, will increase its range over the years.

The sun-loving Cranesbill geranium is a terrific choice for a stunning ground-cover with its wide range of pinks, mauves, blues and purples. Among the 300 species are: 'Phillipe Vapelle', 'Roxanne' and the new 'Espresso', with a dark burgundy/coffee-colored leaf. Not to be confused with the annual geranium, Cranesbill sports attractive foliage amidst a profusion of saucer-shaped flowers. And, it makes a return given a good dead-heading in mid-summer.

Delicate leaves accompany the bright and cheerful golden *Coreopsis* or Tickseed as its upright nature makes for a good contrast to the more floppy and slightly messy geraniums. Although seen in mall parking lots and gas stations, it doesn't deserve to be eliminated for such a reason. 'Moonbeam' is always a reliable choice.

Perhaps one of the most asked about perennials in my garden recently during The Garden Conservancy's Open Days tour, was a *Nepeta* or catmint which I stumbled across a few years ago. It continues to return faithfully. With its almost staggering height and impressive lavender blue flowers, it brought quite a few: "What-is-that-plant?" questions. Hummingbirds aren't so confused; they regularly pay a visit to all *Nepetas*. Unlike the smaller varieties, however, the 'Six Hills Giant' incarnation allows one to better enjoy it as the hummingbird pays its visit.