

Garden Trends and New Plants for 2020

Our contributing editor has looked into her crystal ball (and talked with regional industry experts) so she can tell you about plants and trends to anticipate this year.

BY RITA PELCZAR

SMALLER GARDEN spaces, a growing number of younger people starting to garden, and increased environmental concerns are behind many of today's garden trends. Succulents, pollinator attractors, and container gardens continue to be popular as ornamental edibles, and plants that sport colorful foliage get more notice. Another trend that's crossed my radar is creating personalized outdoor living spaces—for the benefit of humans and wildlife.

In preparation for this article, I canvassed experts from universities, public gardens, and horticultural businesses across the country to find out which new plants performed well in their trials, and how these plants fit into current gardening trends.

MORE YOUNG GARDENERS

According to the 2019 National Gardening Survey, participation in gardening activities among 18- to 34-year-olds—along with this group's expenditure on gardening products—is rising. Brandon Coker, manager of the trial gardens at the University of Georgia in Athens, notes that with younger gardeners he sees a shift in focus, “from large, expansive flower beds to more specialized plants and a personal touch. They are investing in plants and gardening products that say a lot about their own personalities.”

Many younger gardeners, adds Coker, “are finding fulfillment through their digital identity (Facebook, Twitter, etc.). So plants that have big showy flowers and photograph well—like sunflowers and dahlias—are very popular.”



More young people getting into gardening parallels a trend toward large, showy flowers.

SHUTTERSTOCK



Helianthus Suncredible® Yellow



Dahlia City Lights™ Purple



Tagetes erecta 'Big Duck Gold'

Helianthus Suncredible® Yellow from Proven Winners is a good example. “It’s a spectacular *Helianthus* hybrid that bloomed prodigiously all summer long with no deadheading required,” says Kedra Hutchins, Annual Flower Trials program manager at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Shaun Broderick, assistant professor of ornamental horticulture at Mississippi State University in Camp Springs, adds, “So many sunflowers have such a short window where they look good, but Suncredible plays by a whole different set of rules. I took a stroll through our trial garden on November 1st and still found flowers on it.”

Dahlias are also photogenic bloomers. At Cornell’s trial gardens, “four of the top 10 consumer favorites were dahlias,” says Hutchins. Dahlias Venti™ Red+White and Venti™ Passion Fruit, both from Selecta, were particularly notable. The latter, says Hutchins, “had a beautiful pink flower color, were covered in blooms for most of the season, and had vigorous, healthy, foliage.”

Jim Klett, Colorado State University’s annual flower garden trial coordinator, says that City Lights™ Purple dahlia from Selecta was a best of show at its gardens in Fort Collins. “The dark foliage and flowers of this variety make a dramatic statement in the garden. Plants had strong flower power and were favorites of the bees.”

The big bold flowers of ‘Big Duck Gold’, a new marigold (*Tagetes erecta*) from Ameriseed International, make

prime subjects for garden “selfies.” The two- to three-inch-wide, bright yellow flowers are held above deep green leaves all summer long. It’s an All-America Selections (AAS) winner that got top marks in trials from Minnesota to Tennessee.

PLANTS IN SCALE FOR SMALL GARDENS

Gardeners who live in apartments, condominiums, and townhomes think small when it comes to plants, and growing plants in pots is a great option. “Container gardening is still growing in popularity and all the new innovations in contain-

ers, watering devices, and compact plants are helping,” says garden radio and TV host Melinda Myers of Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Raised beds are providing gardening alternatives in sites where soil is inhospitable or non-existent. “Raised beds, formal and rustic, are cropping up everywhere. Gardeners have upped their creativity due to rock-hard clay, small spaces, rental living, or limited pockets of sunlight,” says Linda Lehmusvirta, producer of the PBS television series *Central Texas Gardener*. “Styled with stone, cedar, metal, galva-



Cuphea 'Honey Bells'

nized stock tanks, and repurposed scavenges, there's an option for every budget and personality," she says.

Smaller plant selections are available to match these styles. Tiny Tank™ from Garden Debut is a dwarf cast iron plant (*Aspidistra elatior*) that grows 18 inches tall to 36 inches wide at maturity. Its dark evergreen leaves and neat habit are "very complementary to the urban modern farmhouse architecture that has become very popular," says Jessica Robertson, sales representative with Greenleaf Nursery of Park Hill, Oklahoma. Hardy to USDA Zone 7, it is equally at home in borders or containers.

For sunny balconies or patios, *Cuphea* 'Honeybells' from Ball FloraPlant is a season-long knock out. "It was a good performer in the ground, but with its semi-trailing habit looked great hanging over the side of our pots as well," says Jason Reeves, a horticulturist at the University of Tennessee in Jackson. Typically grown as an annual, this tender perennial reaches a foot in height with a spread of almost two feet. "Plants are covered in beautiful, bicolor, tubular flowers that are orange-rose and yellow," says Bernadette Clark, trial garden manager at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. "You



will notice the plants literally vibrating from the pollinator activity," she adds.

Shades of Pink™ viburnum (*Viburnum tinus*, Zones 8–10) from Star Roses is a compact mounding evergreen shrub that fits perfectly in smaller landscapes. In early spring bright pink buds open to pale pink flowers. "The effect gives the plant the look of being in bloom for a very long period of time. It will also flush with more blooms in fall in milder areas," says Robertson.



Compact vegetable selections are also in vogue. "If you like grape tomatoes but have limited space, try Celano," says Chris Guntter, a horticulture professor and Extension specialist at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. This early producer with good late blight tolerance is well suited to patio or balcony containers, but needs some support.

COLORFUL FOLIAGE

Lots of 2020 introductions boast colorful foliage—an indication of the value



Interest in creating informal gardens, such as this one, that attract pollinators and other wildlife continues to grow.

today’s gardeners place on this attribute. ColorBlaze® Wicked Witch™, from Proven Winners, is a coleus (*Solenostemon* sp.) that garnered top ratings in Mississippi State’s trials. It produces minimal flowers, and “has an attractive maroon leaf with a lime-green edge; unlike some coleus, it thrived in full, all-day sun,” says Broderick.

Another standout in the Mississippi trials was *Colocasia* ‘Dragon Heart Gigante’ (Zones 8–11) released by Plants Nouveau. This tropical foliage plant forms a seven- to eight-foot-tall clump of huge, dark green to black leaves atop burgundy stalks. In cooler regions, the large, fleshy corms can be dug and stored over winter.



Caladium Fast Flash™

Alternanthera FanciFillers™ Choco Chili from Westhoff/PAC Elsner was a standout in trials at Penn State University, according to Adam Sinclair, the university’s flower trials director. “This plant performed well all season; there were no insect or disease issues, and while it is not a flowering plant, it was in the top of our performers,” he says.

Another notable foliage plant in the Penn State trials was *Caladium Fast Flash*™, from Classic Caladiums. Its red leaves boast pink flecks and green margins. It gave an “excellent performance in sun and in shade,” says Sinclair. At the University of Georgia trials, *Caladium* ‘Clowning Around’, also from Classic Caladiums, made a big impression. “Curvy,



ColorBlaze® Wicked Witch™ coleus



Gardens continue to trend smaller, with an emphasis on designing personalized spaces for outdoor living, and compact plants and container gardening remain popular.

uneven green leaf margins, wild green spots, hot pink veins, and pink filler adorn this stand-out caladium,” says Coker.

Winecraft Gold® (‘MINCOJAU3’) from Proven Winners is a four- to six-foot-tall smokebush (*Cotinus coggygria*, Zones 5–8) that glows in the garden. The leaves emerge orange, morph to gold, and

mature to chartreuse. In early summer, it produces billowy clusters of soft-green flowers that turn pink as they mature.

In contrast, Thunderstruck™ Rumblin’ Red™, a crapemyrtle (*Lagerstroemia* sp., Zones 6–10) from Garden Debut, boasts ruffled, nearly black, foliage that sets off terminal clusters of ruby-red, late-summer



Cornus alternifolia Golden Shadows®

flowers. It tops out at 12 to 15 feet tall.

Golden Shadows® from Proven Winners is a variegated version of our native pagoda dogwood (*Cornus alternifolia*, Zones 3–8). With a mature height and spread of 10 to 12 feet, it makes a fine specimen for smaller gardens. The leaves display a bright-green central splotch surrounded by a broad yellow margin. Pink undertones emerge as fall approaches.

BEAUTIFUL EDIBLES

Mary Vaananen, North American Manager of Jelitto Perennial Seeds in Louisville, Kentucky, cites a growing interest in multi-use plants, such as the company’s Ornamental-One series of chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*, Zones 3–9). Selections



Ornamental-One chives

‘Pink One’, ‘Purple One’, and ‘White One’ are distinguished by the bold colors of their flowers. Sturdy and drought tolerant, these foot-tall, clump-forming perennials are “good in the border, and in pots; use in green infrastructure like green roofs, or the herb garden,” says Vaananen.

Everleaf™ Emerald Towers basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) from PanAmerican Seed produces few flowers and has a great flavor profile for Italian cuisine. “It will also add texture variation to the garden with its large, smooth leaves,” says Broderick, who notes it was resistant to powdery mildew in his Tennessee trials.



'Rutgers Obsession DMR' basil

Rutgers University in New Jersey is collaborating with growers on breeding a line of basil plants (*Ocimum* sp.) with resistance to downy mildew, a pervasive fungal disease that has become a problem for basil growers in many regions. Among the new introductions available are 'Rutgers Devotion DMR' and 'Rutgers Obsession DMR'—both productive varieties with great flavor and a compact habit well suited to containers.

Nasturtium 'Tip Top Rose' from Takii Europe was a standout in AAS trials in both the West/Northwest and Mountain/Southwest regions. It has a compact habit and produces abundant rosy-red flowers above medium leaves that look good all season; add a few leaves and flowers to salads.

The AAS winner Pumpkin Blue Prince F1, bred by Seeds by Design, is pretty glamorous for a pumpkin. Each trailing vine bears seven to nine flattened, pale blue pumpkins with sweet, non-stringy, deep orange flesh. Enjoy this early-maturing variety for eating and decorating.

SUCCULENTS

The popularity of succulents continues to rise among new and experienced gardeners. *Bulbine frutescens* 'Avera Yellow' and 'Avera Sunset Orange' from Jelitto bear dense spikes of yellow or orange flowers—three times the size of those of the species—in spring and fall. The succulent



Nasturtium 'Tip Top Rose'

leaves yield a gel, similar to that of *Aloe vera*, useful for burns and skin irritation. "They are great for containers or any little sunny place you want to tuck them in," says Vaananen. Hardy in Zones 8/9 to 11, they will reseed in temperate gardens.



Sempervivum Chick Charms® 'Citrus Sunrise'

Sempervivum Chick Charms® 'Citrus Sunrise' (Zones 3–9) from Growing Colors offers a splash of color to containers or rock gardens. In spring, the rosettes of leaves on this hens-and-chicks selection emerge striped with cream, red, and green, turning mostly red with cream edges after a few weeks.

Whether you garden on a balcony or an acre, in the desert Southwest or coastal New England, there are new plants—far more than those mentioned here—that will suit your conditions and enhance whatever trends you choose to embrace.

Rita Pelczar, who gardens in the mountains of North Carolina, is a contributing editor to The American Gardener.