

New and Underused Plants for the Ozarks

Springtime is new plant time in the Ozarks. Each winter, as a new batch of perennials, annuals and herbs arrive at Bear Creek Nursery, we ooh and aah at the fascinating foliage, fabulous flowers and frivolous fragrances. We wish we could provide photographs for all these new gems; words rarely can properly describe the delicate features of these plants.

Some of the plants reviewed here, however, are not exactly new offerings. We refer to them as “underused” simply because they deserve a place in the garden. Some are overlooked natives that may have been growing out back for a long time. A few have been tried locally and proven their garden-worthy-ness in the long hot Ozark summers.

Whether brand new to the area or underutilized, all these plants are ready to perform in the garden. Some will add much needed texture and a few will dazzle with their colors or patterns. All of them will contribute to the garden, each filling a needy spot on the porch or patio or becoming an endearing member of the landscape.

There are lots of new and underused varieties to discuss, so we’d better get to work.

New Annuals

With the huge selection of annuals available at nurseries, it is always fun to have a few new choices to try in the summer garden. One of our favorites from last year was an African Daisy named *Osteospermum*. The purple flowers rose above the foliage as soon as they were planted and didn’t stop until November. These nonstop performers even took a frost and kept on blooming.

This year there is a new color and a new form. The primrose African Daisy is pleasantly pale yellow, a color that will combine well with almost any other flower. Nasingo purple is a rare spoonbill form of *Osteospermum*. The long daisy petals widen at the ends giving this flower a unique form. The purple color is handsome in the flower bed or in a mixed planter.

Nemesia is another heat tolerant annual that should be used more often. Delicate green leaves cloak this one foot tall plant. The show of flowers then takes over, with orchid like blooms smothering the mound of foliage. The name Mango does not do justice to the lovely blend of cream and oranges in these flowers. A center highlight of dark blue accents the bloom, making it an irresistible addition to the garden.

Our love affair with coleus continues this summer with many tried and true favorites as well as more than a few new offerings. Traditionally used in the shade garden, many new choices have been bred for the sun, bringing out the bold colors in the leaves. Three new types this year are great for mixed planters or as bedding plants in full sun. Needlepoint, Oompah and Merlin’s Magic are delicately leaved specimens with a mix of splashy color. Although these are all quite colorful, Merlin’s Magic especially reminds me of ‘spin art’, those childhood attempts at art, where in youthful exuberance we tried to apply as many colors as possible to a spinning piece of paper.

One other new variety is best used in the shade. The Kong series is being heavily promoted by the growers and with good reason. The Kong coleus have the largest leaves of any coleus and are a standout for providing color in a shady location. The mosaic form has a tricolor leaf with splashes of white on a green field and red highlights overlaid in irregular patterns. The many forms of coleus are heat lovers and offer a perfect plant for any garden situation.

Another non-stop flowering annual is also a form of African Daisy. *Argyranthemum*, which roughly translates to fear of gardening after midnight, may now be called by the more easily pronounced name of Twinkle Rose. The abundant flowers on this daisy, resembling a pincushion with petals, are sun loving and well acclimated to heat.

A heat loving annual known for its stunning foliage is the *Alternanthera*. The one we have tried the last few years is cloaked in deep maroon leaves. A new variety available this year has bright green leaves splashed with pink variegation. This handsome plant appears to be on steroids – a single start last year grew to two feet tall by three feet across.

New Herbs

If you like a cool, refreshing flavor in your summer recipes, Mint is a suburb ingredient. One new offering is apple mint. Lightly fuzzy leaves lend this mint a soft feel and hold a unique taste. Use apple mint to flavor teas, in salads or as a garnish.

Variegated peppermint offers the traditional flavor of mint with an ornamental twist. Dark shiny leaves generously splashed with white variegation make this mint handsome as well as tasty. Yummy in teas, peppermint is also attractive enough to use in a mixed container planting on the porch or patio.

There are many forms of the popular herb Thyme. Besides being a flavorful addition to soups and meat dishes, thyme works overtime in the garden or landscape. The heat and drought resistant members of this family work well as a sun loving groundcover. Smaller leaf forms of creeping thyme are excellent as filler in rock walls & gardens. They also handle foot traffic, making them perfect for use in pathways between stepping stones. Oh yes, did we mention that deer will leave these herbs alone?

This year two new tiny thymes are available for this purpose. Highland Cream thyme is handsome creeping thyme with delicate variegation on each leaf. Cream color edges make this an outstanding choice for a groundcover or spilling over the edges of pots.

Thymus minus is the most delicate form of creeping thyme, with its gazillion tiny leaves creating a tight mat of thyme-ly-ness. Most thymes are evergreen and are smothered in pink or red flowers each spring.

Agastaches (pronounced ag-a-stack-ee) are perfect perennials for the climatically challenged Ozarks. Boasting extreme heat and drought resistance, one would think this plant was created for the last two summers. Delicate licorice scented leaves are a delight to humans but a repellent to deer, who will leave the Agastaches alone.

Cultivar names like Apricot Sprite, Lavender Haze, Navaho Sunset, Pink Pop,

Golden Jubilee, Purple Pygmy and Blue Fortune suggest the diversity of flower colors in this group. Agastaches will grow between one foot and two feet tall and prefer a sunny location in well drained soil.

New Ornamental Grasses

Flowering grasses should be included in every garden for many reasons. Heat and drought tolerance and resistance to deer browse are certainly important excuses to employ these tough members of the plant world. Overlooked by flower-centric gardeners, however, grasses offer subtle textures and colors, often at times when the rest of the garden is waning.

Sedges are short members of the grass family and are compact enough to be used in beds or mixed containers. Two new varieties that are sun or shade tolerant are 'Bronzita' which has a reddish color and 'Amazon Mist', a bluish form. Both grow about one foot tall in a mound shape and combine well with most flowering plants.

Muhly Grass, a southern U.S. native, is continuing its march northward, proving its hardiness here in the Ozarks. A soft grass that grows to 2-3 feet tall, Muhly grass bursts into airy clouds of pink in late September. One of the newer grasses we have trialed, this adaptable native is outstanding in the summer and fall garden.

Sometimes seen on the roadsides in the Ozarks, Bottlebrush Grass has been around for a while. Its extreme heat & drought tolerance makes this grass an effective addition to tough garden spots. It is adaptable to poor soil and shady locations. In midsummer, three foot flower heads rise above the foliage and eventually dry into handsome forms. These 'bottlebrushes' make great dried arrangements or look good for months if left on the plant. This special plant is often overlooked in nurseries.

Dwarf Pampas Grass is a South American native that has created a place in our hearts north of the border. This shorter form is the answer to the less hardy, short lived Pampas Grass that is popular in the south. The dwarf variety is fully hardy in the Ozarks and creates a show stopping display of plumes for over six months. The thick white flowers emerge in August and stand well above 4' tall foliage. Turning buff color in the fall, the flowers look like grass fireworks throughout the winter.

Perennials

The common theme for perennials this year is native plants. The term 'Native Plants' refer to those species that are native to the United States. Aside from being well adapted to local growing conditions, these plants offer all the comforts of growing "close to home." Disease resistance, heat and drought tolerance and abundant flowers are all attributes bred into these improvements of old standards.

One new favorite was flowering outside at the nursery through late November last year. 'Blushing Butterflies' is a short form of the native Gaura, an irrepressible perennial that can be seen flowering on roadsides of the Ozarks, even after the most forbidding summers. One-inch pink "butterflies" appear to float above red tinged foliage. Drought, heat and sun tolerance make this native well adapted to this area.

Stoke's Aster or Stokesia is another heat tolerant perennial. Native to the southeastern United States, the flowers on this popular plant reach almost 3 inches in

diameter on a compact, one foot tall mound. 'Colorwheel' is a newly developed form that boasts of deepening flower color as they mature. Opening white, the petals evolve to a blue and then darker purple as they grow, providing a beautiful three color display on a single plant.

The Butterfly Weed is a common and much loved roadside flower. Its bright orange flowers attract butterflies by the dozens and are a harbinger of the summer solstice. Breeding efforts have produced a series with a combination of bright yellows & oranges. 'Gay Butterflies' Butterfly Weed gives the appearance of the yellow end of a box of Crayola crayons gone berserk. Lovely yellows, oranges and hues in between are a feature of these improved natives. By cutting the flowerheads immediately after they fade, the attentive gardener can encourage a rebloom on these sturdy heat lovers.

Coreopsis is perhaps one of the most loved of spring flowers. Fields of yellow are one of the welcome sights of each new warm season. Several new forms have been adapted to expand the possibilities available from this versatile native. 'Rising Sun' is a 3 foot tall variety whose flowers float above the foliage like miniature yellow clouds. The base of each petal is marked with mahogany, creating a splendid two-tone form. This is a long blooming perennial that flowers well into summer.

'Baby Sun' is a much desired short coreopsis, growing under 16 inches tall. Its compact nature makes it more useful in a small garden or in front of a mixed border. Double flowers appear fluffy and last well into summer.

A brand new hybrid coreopsis is brought to you by the same breeders who created the Colorwheel Stokesia. These folks, who obviously never sleep, have come up with a stunning new form called 'Jethro Tull'. This short form grows under one foot tall and features fluted deep golden yellow petals. This highly unusual configuration resembles a symphony consisting solely of yellow clarinets. This early summer flowering coreopsis will make a colorful note in the garden.

One other native that is immensely satisfying in the back of a mixed border is Salvia 'Black & Blue'. This four foot perennial, topped with sprays of sky blue flowers on dark stems, is not shy about flowering. At the nursery, this tough Salvia start a show of blooms in late May and do not quit until the first hard freeze. Although the garden books will say Black & Blue will not survive winters this far north, ours have been happily growing in embarrassingly poor soil for over three years. Use this perennial where you want to tease the deer, who be repelled by the scented leaves.

Bear Creek Nursery, located 3 miles north of Eureka Springs on Highway 23, has one of the largest collections of new & unusual plants in the Ozarks. Along with a selection of new annuals, perennials, herbs and grasses, the Bear offers many native trees and shrubs as well as a number of aquatic plants to enhance the pond. Landscape materials and a comprehensive selection of glazed & terra cotta pots round out the products available at your friendly neighborhood garden center. Sound advice is always available from the well informed staff, who will be happy to help you find just the right plant to compliment your garden. Landscape services are available year round. Call 479-253-7466 for more information on any of the new introductions reviewed in this article.