

## A Pot of Pinks and Other Perennials

By Susan Camp

February is usually a cold, dreary month of rain and snow. It is the time I spend looking at gardening catalogs and magazines, dreaming of new perennials and herbs to add our collection. I enjoy reading about new cultivars, although I often end up purchasing tried and true favorites.

This February has offered several warm, lovely days, making it seem more like early April than the last gasp of winter. This weekend was no exception, as Jim and I spent hours outside both days, picking up fallen limbs and twigs from last week's windstorm and preparing to reset the large stones around our parking area. The work was back-breaking, so it was pleasant to relax in the evening and read about potential additions to our garden beds.

New varieties and hybrids are listed on the websites of reputable retail companies, making it easy to select fresh colors and plant sizes. I found two perennials with new cultivars or hybrids of look promising for planting this year.

Old-fashioned cottage pinks (*Dianthus plumarius*) are favorite garden perennials. So-called because petal edges look as though they have been snipped with pinking shears (I thought the name derived from the color of the blossoms), pinks have long been featured in cottage gardens for their dainty flowers, mounded, gray-green foliage, and spicy clove scent. Pinks belong to the same large genus of 200 to 300 species as Sweet William (*D. barbatus*) and carnation (*D. caryophyllus*). Modern pinks (*D. allwoodii*) are hybrids of cottage pinks and carnations.

Pinks prefer full sun and well-drained soil with a neutral pH of 7.0. Natives of Europe and Asia, pinks will grow in USDA Hardiness Zones 3 to 9. Flower colors are shades of pink, red, or white. Pinks are deer and drought tolerant and have no serious insect or disease problems, although crown rot can occur if plants are grown in beds with poor drainage. Pinks make lovely rock garden or low border plants.

'Black Cherry Frost' is a newly introduced *D. plumarius* for 2017. Semi-double blossoms are a deep cherry red with off-white edging, blooming in June and September. Deadhead after the first bloom for more flowers in early fall.

'Paint the Town Magenta' bears single purple-red flowers on blue foliage in June and September. This dianthus hybrid grows 6 to 8 inches high with a spread of 12 to 14 inches, blooming in June and September. Butterflies love it; deer don't.

*Amsonia tabernaemontana*, commonly called bluestar or blue dogbane, is an American native. Bluestar will grow in USDA Hardiness Zones 3 to 9b. It prefers well-drained, moist, loamy soil in full sun to part shade, although plants grown in shade may become leggy and require staking or cutting back to maintain fullness.

Bluestar matures into an erect, mounded plant 2 to 3 feet tall with a 2 to 3 foot spread. Leaves are narrow and willow-like. The lovely, star-shaped, light blue flowers bloom in late spring and early summer, with some rebloom after initial flowering. Bluestar is drought and deer tolerant,

without serious disease or insect pest problems. Bluestar works well in containers and rain gardens or massed in borders.

‘Storm Cloud’ is a new amsonia cultivar for 2017. The periwinkle blue flowers contrast with black stems and dark green, silver-veined leaves that lighten to olive green during the summer. ‘Storm Cloud’ grows 24 to 30 inches high with a 40-inch spread. It appears to tolerate both northern and southern climates.

The Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder contains entries on dianthus, amsonia, and hibiscus. The National Gardening Association Plants Database website is another helpful resource. Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 426-203 “Perennials: Culture, Maintenance and Propagation” offers valuable information on all aspects of growing perennials in your garden.

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