

## Perennial Picks for Spring

By Susan Camp

A few weeks ago, I mentioned browsing through seed catalogs as a way to pass the long winter hours. Flower gardeners love to daydream about all of the wonderful plants they will buy in the spring and the gorgeous banks of flowers they will present to awed and admiring neighbors. The fact is that all of that planting and growing takes a lot of money, time, and back-breaking work. Practicality often demands that we scale down those complex garden plans. Rather than attempt to sow hundreds of seeds of 20 different varieties in seed flats, why not select a few new plants to replace ones that have lived their lives? You can spice up the looks and fragrance of the garden and have enough time to relax and enjoy their beauty. Perennials that attract bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds are excellent choices.

It may be a little early to look for perennials at the local nurseries, but the choices online are limitless. If you decide to shop online, choose reputable companies, read reviews, and talk to friends who have purchased from those sites. Most companies will mail purchases at the appropriate planting time for our USDA Plant Hardiness Zone 7b.

New perennial varieties appear every spring. Several caught my eye online with vivid descriptions of color, fragrance, hardiness, and disease and deer resistance. Photographs cannot replace seeing, smelling, and touching a plant, but they can give us a starting point for plant selection.

Two new varieties of English lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*) are very attractive, with characteristic lavender fragrance. ‘Silver Mist’, with silvery foliage and dark purple flowers, blooms from July to September, reaching a height of 16 to 20 inches. Suggested uses for this compact variety are as container plants or edging. ‘Silver Mist’ is drought, heat, and deer resistant. ‘Royal Velvet’, a little taller at 24 to 30 inches, displays velvety, dark purple buds in June and July. Lavenders need six hours of sunlight each day (full sun) and well-drained, neutral to slightly alkaline soil. On the Middle Peninsula, you may need to add limestone or wood ashes to sweeten acidic soil. Contact the Gloucester Extension Office at (804) 693-2602 for information on obtaining a soil test kit.

Bee balm (*Monarda didyma*) is another favorite perennial, attractive to bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds. Bee balm, sometimes called Oswego tea, is native to North America. ‘Grand Mum’, at 18 to 24 inches tall, is a new variety for 2016, with large, candy pink blossoms and dark green leaves. It blooms in July and August and is deer and powdery mildew resistant. ‘Pardon My Cerise’ is a Proven Winners variety, growing 14 to 18 inches high with cherry pink flowers in July and August. It is deer resistant, as well. Monardas need full sun to part shade and evenly moist, well-drained soil. Divide them every one to two years.

Phlox is a popular perennial in eastern Virginia. 'Early Purple' reaches 16 inches in height and produces fragrant, bright purple blooms with white centers from June through August. Staking isn't necessary with this new variety. 'Early Purple' needs full sun and moist, well-drained neutral to slightly acid soil. It is less susceptible to powdery mildew than other varieties, but free air movement between plants is essential to prevent the disease.

Gaillardia x grandiflora 'Mesa Peach' is a new variety of the popular North American native sometimes called blanketflower. Blossoms are peach, shading to gold at the petal tips, and appear in May and June, lasting for several weeks. 'Mesa Peach' grows 14 to 16 inches tall and needs full sun and dry, well-drained soil. It is heat, drought, and deer resistant.

It is time to start thinking about planting flowers for summer. Besides these new varieties on the market, our tried and true old friends are still available, so there are plenty of perennials to please everyone's taste. Happy Spring Dreaming!

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