

## Give Your Garden an Old/New Look

Are we not creatures of habit? I have a weakness for small delicate blooms and gentle colors. Memory plays a part in my love of lilies of the valley and I cherish small daffodils like 'Katie Heath' that is opalescent in all its stages. I remember the exquisite beauty of hybrid tea rose 'Michele Meiland' with its weak neck and weaker constitution in a garden long ago.

I used to think great swathes of tall and brilliant cannas belong in state parks where their expansive circular beds outlined in flaming red pelargoniums (aka geraniums) could enliven acres of grass worn thin by unorganized juvenile ball games. Now I realize you can put anything anywhere, with a modicum of taste and luck. Pastels are lovely but melt in the distance: bright colors shout for attention.

My eye was caught recently by pots of gaillardia, blanket flowers. Years ago, on a patch of sandy N.C. soil where grass would not grow we had them, wild red-and-yellow-catch-a-fellow daisies in abundance interspersed with a lot of spiny cacti, a snare for bare feet. Now despite my firm resolution to add nothing to what is already struggling against invading vinca, Japanese stilt grass, and tree seedlings, I have three new gaillardia.

Two are *G. aristata* 'Gallo Red' and 'Gallo Orange' and they are nearly the same color but the red has slightly recurving petals and the orange has petals slightly tipped with gold, more like the species. The centers are fat and rusty, typical of the genus. They are eight to ten inches tall, supposed to bloom all summer. Although perennial, they can be short lived.

The third one, 'Oranges and Lemons' is taller, to 18", with lighter green foliage and a blend of more muted colors. It will be a good companion for the gaura that wanders through that sunny bed. Generally these blanket flowers do well in poor soil as long as the drainage is good. They are said to perish in clay. I hope they will happily return again but just in case they need to be encouraged I may try to propagate them mid-summer. I read in one catalog that you could start new plantlets by cutting straight down along the side of the plant.

Actually, this morning when I eased 'Oranges and Lemons' out of its pot most of the roots fell off with the loose mulch used as potting soil, sigh. I hope those remaining roots are amenable to reproduction.

Lantana is a perennial shrub that is somewhat less than perennial. Each spring I poke about the stiff branches looking for signs of life. It is really a tropical plant and the cultivar most likely to succeed in Gloucester is 'Miss Huff'. The first one I tried died but the one just now showing crinkly jade green leaves at the base came from Niche Gardens in 2008. I have avoided cutting it back until the new growth emerges in spring as I had thought the first failure was due to my over-enthusiastic approach with the loppers in late fall. However, the yellow lantanas that grow so well opposite the Gloucester P.O. are routinely cut back in fall and they thrive. Who knows?

The flowers resemble other plants in the verbena family but rather than having the tightly grouped flowers in one color, the 1-1 1/2" flowerheads have circles of different shades of yellow, pink, red. Pretty.

Agastache is one perennial that has refused to survive for me. It doesn't like the soil, understandably, although the soil is much improved after years of effort. This plant grows so robustly for a friend she has to thin it out but her thinnings failed after a summer here. I love the 'licorice' foliage and the blue spires that attract butterflies and bees. Agastache is related to the mints and salvias that do grow in my plot. 'Blue Fortune' is easily found and easily grown. There are also coral colored ones: 'Apricot Sprite', hummingbird mint, is native to the Southwest but may be happy in your garden.

Last week while weeding first I found a tag, “Agastache ‘Blue Fortune’”, then the plant, a rootless, well-gnawed stub but with two slender stems – one with a bud showing a speck of blue. So it was not the soil, but a vole. I dusted the nub with rooting hormone and potted it with hope.

The urge to push the limits on what can be grown is epidemic among gardeners. Our dreams expand but eventually we become more realistic and settle, more or less happily, for what will grow for us. The relationship between what a plant requires and the specific make up of the soil in that particular spot remains a mystery through years of trial and error. A lesson in humility is gardening!