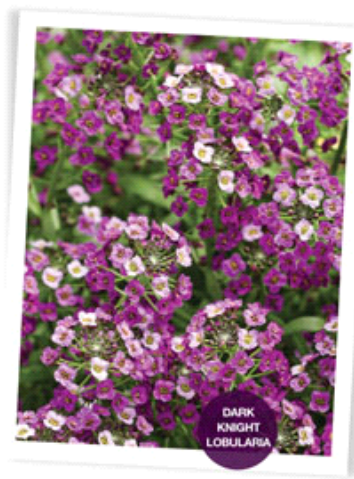


Features

1/31/2015

Dark Knight: The Origin Story

Katie Elzer-Peters



Don't make the mistake of calling any of the plants in the lobularia series from Proven Winners "Sweet Alyssum," because this isn't your grandma's anemic container plant. When the weather warms and it's time to yank struggling seedling alyssum plants from a container planting, these lobularia are just getting started. Their ability to start growing during chilly spring nights and keep going, even in the south, when the summer air turns to a soupy, swampy mess is what makes these plants Proven Winners (yes, that was a bad pun)

"The Dallas Arboretum and Costa Farms in Miami both reached out to us to say, with some disbelief, that the plants were still going strong in August," says Rick Schoellhorn, who's in charge of special products for Proven

Winners.

Rick worked with Swiss plant breeder Peter Wicki-Freidl while he was developing Snow Princess, the first in the series of now five lobularia. Dark Knight, a lobularia with deep purple flowers, hits the market this year.

"Peter came from the town of St. Johann in northeastern Switzerland, near Liechtenstein. Because of the short, cool summers where he lived near the Alps, Peter quickly started traveling to find the kind of genetics he wanted to add to his creations," Rick says. He eventually moved to the Canary Islands.

Rick adds, "The thing that makes Peter and his plants good to highlight is that his breeding exemplifies what Proven Winners is about: We find breeders who break boundaries with crops. Peter's specialty was breathing new life into old garden varieties."

Snow Princess is the result of crossing wild Canary Island lobularia plants with existing seedling varieties, producing a much more vigorous, heat-tolerant plant.

"Blushing Princess and Dark Knight were Peter's final releases before he passed away back in Switzerland in 2013," Rick says. "He wanted to get Snow Princess planted at the White House. I think that has finally happened."

This series' release has changed the way growers deal with alyssum crops. "When Snow Princess first came out everyone realized she's not a princess; she's a bit of a monster," Rick says. Proven Winners added vigor ratings to all of their plants so growers would know how to combine this new introduction for success in the greenhouse. Dark Knight is slightly more gentlemanly, pairing well with medium-vigor plants, while still putting on a big show. Because of a more open growth habit, Dark Knight and the other lobularia in the series have fewer problems with botrytis and rot while on nursery racks.

Stocking this plant is almost guaranteed to result in repeat purchases from year to year. "A consumer is always delighted to have a plant that exceeds expectations and home gardeners love these," adds Rick. "Home gardeners think about what they grew in the garden and they look at this plant and say, 'That grew well for me. I will grow that again.'"

Before:

"Seedling varieties of alyssum have been bred to grow into small, compact, cupcake-shaped plants without the need for growth regulators," says Rick Schoellhorn. "Boring and not very useful. Not to mention the fact that there was hardly any use for alyssum in southern states because the window between frost-free and 70-degree nights was about 10 days."

After:

Going back to the genetic source of lobularia allowed breeder Peter Wicki-Freidl to create plants that not only survive the heat of summer, but thrive. "They're true landscape plants," said Jeanine Standard, media coordinator for Proven Winners. "We have pictures of Dark Knight growing in [Proven Winners Director of Marketing] Marshall Dirks' garden last summer. They formed a gorgeous border for his garden beds." **GP**

Katie Elzer-Peters is a garden writer and owner of The Garden of Words, LLC, a marketing and PR firm handling mostly green-industry clients. Contact her at Katie@thegardenofwords.com or at www.thegardenofwords.com.