

Features

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Behind the Variety: Finding the “Supergeranium”

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There are geraniums, tight little mounds of foliage and lollipops of flowers, and then there are Calliope Geraniums—lush with masses of semi-glossy, semi-trailing leaves and loads of brightly colored, highly saturated blooms. It took 15 years to create the (if not best-selling, then close to it) geranium on the market—Calliope Dark Red. The plant that would go on to revolutionize the geranium category started out as nothing more than a side project for plant breeder Mitch Hanes.

Mitch was working on a project at Goldsmith Seeds (the company was later purchased by Syngenta) crossing ivy geraniums and zonal geraniums.

“We were working with what we call the ‘splash patterns’ in the flowers—integrating the colors from ivy geraniums into zonal geraniums.” That was the goal—not developing an interspecific hybrid that would turn out to be a “supergeranium.”

As with any science experiment, though, things don’t always go as planned. The first crosses were far from spectacular—no matter what you were going for.

There are multiple plants in the series: Burgundy, Dark Red (most popular), Hot Pink, Lavender Rose, Scarlet Fire and the new Crimson Flame. For retailers merchandising Calliope Geraniums, there’s been a “Blooms All Summer” campaign. Geraniums are now part of an all-summer, full-color program, rather than being relegated to spring and there are plenty of customers who will return just for these plants.

Pictured: Calliope Dark Red

“When you work in conventional breeding, you’ll end up with hundreds of seeds to work with. With interspecific crosses you might get five seeds you can grow out and select from. And then the seedlings are stressed and weak,” Mitch says. As the team continued to work on flower color, “We got really excited when we realized we were developing germplasm that was unique to us and nobody else had them.” As they crossed and

backcrossed, “We saw that we could further strengthen the strengths of the ivies and zonals, beyond color. You get other ideas while you’re working, realize things; see potential. It’s exciting.”

It took 15 years working on the project that resulted in Calliope to get to a winner. The same amount of time it takes to raise a child and send it to high school. They kept going because, “We could see the progress being made—the strengths of each plant becoming more apparent in the crosses.” For example, “It took about 25 crosses to end up with Calliope Dark Red,” Mitch notes. (Dark Red was not the first Calliope Geranium, but it’s definitely the most popular.)

The patience paid off in the form of an interspecific hybrid with the best qualities of ivy geraniums—glossy leaves, trailing habit, shorter flower stems and denser inflorescences—combined with zonal geraniums—heat tolerance and flower color.

The first showing of the new geraniums was at California Pack Trials in spring 2008. First shipments hit retailers in fall 2008/2009. Response was immediately favorable. Particularly when Calliope Dark Red was introduced. “Up until then, red geraniums were kind of orange-ish. This one is a deep, dark red. You can recognize from the street,” Mitch says. “Consumers love it because it grows in containers and in the landscape all summer in full sun to partial shade. The flowers won’t burn and that’s been a big problem with geraniums historically—particularly red varieties.”

This year, Calliope Crimson Flame will be newly available in the United States. It has bright red petals with hot pink accents. “I’m always looking forward to developing and pushing out new material,” Mitch adds.

He has worked in plant breeding since 1980 saying, “I remember when I was 17 years old telling people that I wanted to be a plant breeder. I’m not even sure where that came from. Probably because it was a combination of science and the outdoors.” His work and patience has paid off, resulting in new, game-changing varieties for home gardeners. **GP**

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