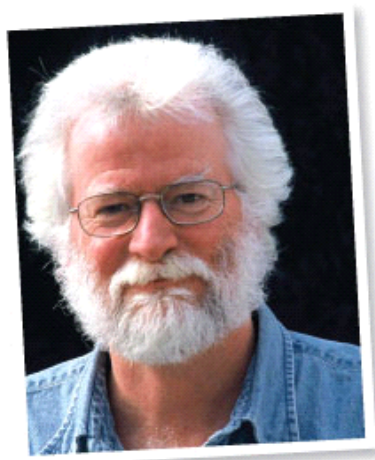


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Pantone Tones It Up

John Friel



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A new year brings so many things. One of the most predictable and subtly influential: The new Pantone Color of the Year.

This Space has, um, celebrated the COTY many times, often poking a bit of (I hope) good-natured fun at Pantone's trademark flowery prose in praise of its latest brainchild. For 2023, the gurus of hues have anointed Viva Magenta 18-1750.

It's an interesting choice for the green industry. Magenta is a hot shade that can be problematic as a flower color, difficult to harmonize with less assertive tones. That's because it's located on color wheels precisely between, and comprising equal parts of, red and blue.

Blue and red are at opposite ends of the visible color spectrum, so the human eye and mind can't fully process both at the same time. The brain switches back and forth constantly like a multitasking computer. This toggling gives the color its vibrancy, nearly a sense of movement. Pantone, in its breathless—but this time accurate—way, describes it as “pulsating.”

It's also an interesting choice in the context of the times. During the pandemic, many found solace in soothing, calming tones like 2020's choice, Classic Blue. 2021 brought us two colors: Illuminating, a bright sunny yellow, traditionally a color of optimism, and Ultimate Gray, which was precisely what it sounds like: The non-color of your comfy old Zoom-meeting sweatpants, minus the coffee stains. In hindsight, it seems like bet-hedging.

Even 2022's choice, Veri Peri, a periwinkle blue, was still relatively staid. But now, apparently, we're ready to be brassy once again, ready for more strident, confident hues.

“As we emerge from an intense period of isolation,” Pantone said, it's time to gird up our loins with a “brave and fearless ... new symbol of strength” that “vibrates with vim and vigor” and “galvanizes our spirit.”

Whew! You rock, 18-1750! Pantone, thanks for being there for us!

As you know, all through the pandemic, the garden was there for us all, an oasis, a refuge. Whatever your role as a plantsperson, you helped morale more than you may know.

The garden always has what people need, be it bold or subdued, cool or blazing, calm or vibrant—or all of the above. Unlike the human eye, the vegetable kingdom can embrace and embody beauty from end to end of a vast

and varied spectrum, and make sense of it all simultaneously. And, yes, the garden can have magenta, as much of it as you wish. But it's not universally loved.

At a long-ago Symposium of the Perennial Plant Association, a presenter extolled the subtle beauties of hardy plants and the seasonal evolution of a well-appointed perennial border—as opposed to beds of disposable annuals like “screaming magenta impatiens that sear your eyeballs.”

I believe the speaker was Pierre Bennerup of Sunny Border Nursery, one of PPA's Founding Fathers. Whoever it was, that talk apparently made quite an impression. I still can't hear the word “magenta” without my mind adding the adjective “screaming.” In writing flower descriptions for catalogs, I've often deferred to the nearly-synonymous, but softer-sounding, “fuchsia.”

Equally interesting is magenta's history. Invented as an aniline dye in 1859, it was named for a town where a famous 19th-century battle was fought. French & Sardinians 1, Austrians 0. The town was named for a 4th-century Roman general and emperor, Marcus Aurelius Valerius Maxentius. Aren't you glad you asked?

In the garden, it's not just for annuals. Plenty of perennials like achillea, agastache, centaurea, dianthus and verbenas, to name just a few, feature flowers in that range. Bull Plant Genetics touts its SunMagic Echinacea series as a Pantone partner.

It's also not just for flowers: This is the Container Gardening Issue, after all, so keep it in mind for patio pots and decor. GP Senior Editor Ellen Wells did a deeper exploration of Viva Magenta and its implications last month.

So what? So this: Take the hype with a grain of salt, ignore my prejudices and just accept that the Pantone Color of the Year matters. It'll be everywhere. Your customers will be looking for it, and for colors that play well with it in their homes, gardens and attire. Happens every year. **GP**

John Friel is a freelance writer with more than 40 years of experience in horticulture.