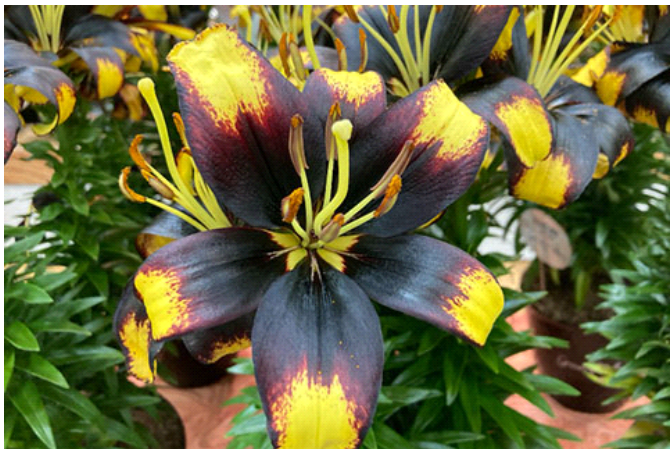


Features

8/29/2025

Retailers' Top Choices

Ellen C. Wells

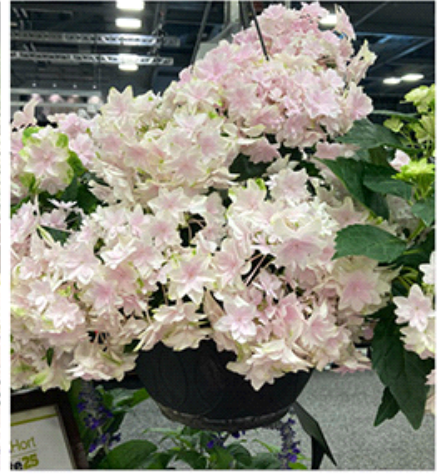


Any help a retailer buyer and grower can get to sort through the hundreds of new (and somewhat-new) plants and products on the market is always appreciated. That's why The Garden Center Group (GCG) offers its Retailers' Choice Awards (RCA) each year. If you're not familiar with the program, GCG recruits garden retailer volunteers to walk the Cultivate trade show floor and find products that they would sell or use in their own stores. The group convenes at the end of the first day of the show with their dozens of nominations and they whittle the list down to 15 surefire picks.

Without further ado, here is this year's crop of RCA winners. (And be sure to say a "thank you" to the Group for doing the legwork for you!)

Asiatic Lily Looks Tiny Massive—Growing Colors.

As Danny Summers of GCG insinuated with his description, with real flowers like Tiny Massive, it's not surprising that some folks mistake AI-generated plants as real! The combo of nearly black and bright yellow and in such a pattern is just an incredible work of breeding. Also note how large those buds are, with three to six flower buds per stem. The retailers who nominated Tiny Massive said this would be a fantastic plant for fall sales.



***Rudbeckia hirta* Solar Sisters—Bloomin’ Easy.**

This is a totally touchable pincushion-type rudbeckia. Featuring large double flowers with touches of sunny yellows and oranges, the flower heads gradually deepen to rich copper tones with the onset of cooler nights. Zones 7 to 9.

***Brunnera* Frost King—Darwin Perennials.**

I’ve always been a fan of brunnera, and again, this caught my eye before the award was given out. And you can see why! Its very large leaves have very strong venation with lovely silvery coloring. It also has a uniform habit both in pots and in the landscape. And another reason it caught my eye—signage indicating it’s deer-proof, thanks to its super-rough leaves.

***Hydrangea* Haba Soft Pink—Ball Seed.**

This is a floral hydrangea from the folks at Aldershot that’s meant for hanging baskets (the “Haba” stands for “hanging basket”). It’s loaded with double flowers that cascade to create a beautiful basket. And, of course, this Soft Pink can easily become Soft Blue with some pH adjustments. It’s 10 weeks in production from a 3- to 4-in. dormant liner. Ideal for Easter and Mother’s Day.



Pampas Grass Tiny Pampa—Dig Plants.

Sometimes ornamental grasses can be just too much. Like pampas grass, for instance. But Dig Plants’ Tiny Pampa is just 2-ft. tall (and that includes its flowering stalks!). It’s also missing the sharpness of its leaves that other varieties have. This well-behaved pampas grass is ideal for smaller living spacings, patio gardens and even as a container plant.

Tomatoes Partyball and Akoya—Syngenta Flowers.

I can't wait to try these two patio-sized tomatoes next year! First, Partyball—the lower plant in the photo—is a compact and determinate tomato with cherry-sized fruits and resistance to Tomato Mosaic Virus (strains 1 and 2) and tolerance to Late Blight. Akoya (above Partyball) produces nearly black fruit that gradually develops some red color—and that's the stage at which you eat them. This one is more of a 10- to 12-in. basket item. And wouldn't it be spectacular as a fall item?

Ajuga Princess Leia—North Carolina Farms.

The folks at North Carolina Farms, the liner producer of this variety, give full credit for the award to Concept Plants, who introduced this stunner of an ajuga. Normally a bit of a background plant, this green-and-white variegated plant stands out in a planting. And when it's flowering in spring, its deep purple flowers only highlight its presence.



Dahlias Dalaya Lace and Venti series—Selecta One.

I think this was the case of “gosh, Selecta’s new dahlias look great, let’s give them all an RCA.” Fair enough! Both series have multiple color options. The Dalaya Lace series’ newest additions have big blooms and some beautiful bicolors, like the Dalaya Pink Lace with white-tipped pink petals (top row in the photo). The Ventis are double-flowered with some seriously neat bicolors, such as PinkBurst (on bottom shelf). This one caught my eye a full 24 hours before the RCAs were even announced!

Caladium Heart to Heart Midnight Oil—Proven Winners.

I saw this plant on a tour of the Proven Winners booth first thing as the show opened and knew it was a winner. The leaf’s surface literally looked like an oil slick, but it’s all leaf! Nearly black, this caladium blends deep green and red tones on arrow-shaped leaves. The “oil slick” looks like it’s moving, too, with its wavy leaf margins. As a caladium, it grows in shade, but Midnight Oil is at its darkest when in direct sunlight.

Climb-itt Climbing Poles, Stakes, Wire and Clips—Proven Winners’ leafjoy.

We’ve talked about these products before and they’ve also won a Cool Product Award (similar to a Retailers’ Choice Award) at TPIE. As a reminder, these are plant supports made from elephant grass and potato skins, and while they last for years indoors, they begin to break down in a landfill or even compost pile, I would imagine. What’s news here—at least for me—is the really nice retail display. Everything your houseplant parents are looking for to support their plant babies, all in one spot.



Azalea Encore Autumn Kiss—Plant Development Services Inc.

There's been some hype around Autumn Kiss and with good reason! Its bicolor blooms—with dark pink centers, a sweet pink middle and deep pink edges—is a one-of-a-kind variegation. The shrub itself is compact at 3- to 4-ft. tall and wide. As an Encore, you can bet it puts on a show in spring, then again later in the season.

Catharanthus hybrid Soiree Flamenco Electric Salmon Eye and Plum Velvet—Suntory Flowers.

When you can't decide between two colors, give them both an award! Both of these new colors in the Soiree series are stunners. What makes them different from other vincas is their ruffled and fringed petals. Both are bicolors, with Plum Velvet having a white fringe and Electric Salmon Eye having a gradation in dark to softer salmon.



Begonia hybrid I'CONIA Bacio Lemon—Dümmen Orange.

The medium-to-large lemon-yellow flowers pop against the deep green/bronze leaves. It's a slightly cascading variety they say is heat and stress tolerant. I received one as a sample this spring and I can attest to all three of those characteristics!

Hydrangea macrophylla Centennial Ruby—Monrovia.

Monrovia will be celebrating its 100th anniversary next year and in celebration they've released Centennial Ruby. This reblooming bigleaf hydrangea has ruby-red mophead blooms that darken as they age—and they can last up to 130 days! It also has exceptionally sturdy stems and thick dark green leaves in a 3-ft. by 3-ft. habit.

Petunia Funhouse Black Widow—Syngenta Flowers.

A second black item from Syngenta, this petunia caught the judges attention for its use as a design element for fall

containers. With fall being the one of the top seasons for decorating, folks are looking for more design elements that are appropriate for fall and Halloween. And, honestly, it's just made for the season and can go well paired with just about any color. **GP**