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Features

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5 Cool Perennials

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As we think about perennials, let's focus on plant communities. After all, each plant blooms for a limited time. When used together, consumers begin seeing how each plant contributes to their landscape. A grass may look underwhelming in the garden center, but consumers will see that grass in a new perspective when you mix it among the showier perennials to emphasize bloom and texture.



Sedges (Carex)

Roy Diblik, owner of Northwind Perennials, has spent decades working with consumers to create plant communities. When he designs landscapes, he uses grids to create collections of perennials that work together. One plant he frequently uses is sedges.

"I'd recommend everyone put in a sedge community," he said. "They're not romantic, but you can sell them in a system with other flowering perennials to create texture and color."

Over 500 species of sedges are native to North America and many complement other plants in a landscape. From a functional standpoint, they have a deep root system that's ideal for water infiltration, especially in rain gardens. Their tolerance for shade is also a plus. And once these plants become established, gardening becomes less tedious.

"You don't have much weeding when the sedge matrix fills in," Roy added.

As you're creating retail displays, use three or five different plants to spark ideas for growing sedges in the landscape. Depending on the species, these can be pre-planned gardens for sun, shade or wet sites.

Sedges in landscape designs. Photos courtesy of Roy Diblik.



Pink Profusion Bowman's Root

(*Gillenia trifoliata* Pink Profusion)

As Paul James explored the wilds of Virginia in the 1980s, he came across a unique gillenia with light-pink stems and calyxes. He took some divisions and sent one to the Mt. Cuba Center. After a decade of evaluation, the staff at Mt. Cuba knew this plant would be a winner in gardens.

I spoke to Sam Hoadley, the manager of Horticultural Research at Mt. Cuba, to learn why this plant deserves more attention. "Pink Profusion is attractive from the moment it emerges. The stems have a purple-red tone and the pinkish blooms have an airy appearance over the foliage in late spring," Sam said. "In summer, the plant takes on a shrub-like appearance with attractive seedheads."

Along with multi-season interest, Pink Profusion is a durable plant for mass plantings, as well as for borders in formal or informal sites. And it thrives in moist soil and in full sun or partial shade. After a strong performance in the trials, Mt. Cuba wanted the plant to be commercially available. "We identify plants that are of interest, then share them with commercial growers," Sam added.

Like many perennials, gillenia takes a couple of years to reach its full potential, but once established, it'll live for decades. "I often compare it with amsonia or baptisia, where you're buying those roots to grow stronger in years to come," Sam said. "Having good photos is key to showing people the potential of this plant."

Gillenia trifoliata Pink Profusion. Photos courtesy of Mt. Cuba Center.

Iron Butterfly Ironweed

(*Vernonia lettermannii* Iron Butterfly)



Ironweed has always flown under the radar, even with the recent interest in native plants. About 15 years ago, Dr. Allan Armitage was trialing vernonia seedlings in search of potential introductions. After some basic crossings and seed collecting, he noticed a selection that stood out. "The species is normally 4- to 5-ft. tall, but this seedling was more compact and had even more blooms," he said.

After further evaluation, the plant was introduced to the industry. "People who grow it love it," Allan noted. "The foliage is similar to Amsonia hubrichtii and it blooms later in the season."

While you won't see blooms on the sales floor in peak spring, you can emphasize different ways to use vernonia. "It attracts tons of pollinators and looks outstanding in mass plantings," Allan said. "The feathery foliage is pleasant all summer long."

When thinking about collections, display this plant with other full sun perennials to bring out their best features.

Vernonia lettermannii Iron Butterfly in July (top) and in September (bottom). Photos courtesy of Dr. Allan Armitage.

Spigelia

Hans Hansen, the director of new plant development at Walters Gardens, is no stranger to unique plants. When he

saw Little Redhead Spigelia for the first time at Plants Delight Nursery, he saw the potential for something special. As the team evaluated Little Redhead, the excitement grew.



Laura Robles, regional produce manager for Walters, shared why Spigelia is special. “The tubular red flowers appear for many weeks, with an initial heavy flush in late spring and rebloom thereafter,” she said. “The plants are native selections to North America and attractive to hummingbirds, and they thrive in a variety of conditions.”

Since 2011, Hans has worked with spigelia to develop a collection of Proven Winners varieties. Spigelia blooms early in the season and the flowers steal the show. “This plant can hold an end cap or display on its own merit due to the magnificent red or orange flowers—since there are few perennials with this look, it is automatically an eye-catcher,” Laura said.

Native and pollinator displays will benefit from the bright blooms. In addition to signs for each variety, Proven Winners also offers other merchandising options.

“There are also EZ Scapes recipes featuring the branded varieties, including Native Roots in the Mid-Atlantic and the Hummingbird Attractor Combo, for which signage is also available,” Laura added.

Spigelia Apple Slices, Spigelia Orange Slices. Photos courtesy of Walters Gardens.



Blue Star Kalimeris

(*Kalimeris incisa* Blue Star)

When I saw this perennial for the first time, I was shocked. It was early July and these aster-like plants were in full bloom (I soon learned these weren’t asters, but rather a different member of the aster family). Their blue color was stunning and the timing was unique. From what I’ve heard, kalimeris is popular in Europe, but is slowly gaining traction in the U.S.

Alison Storm, marketing manager at Prides Corners, shared why their production team values this plant: “We offer Blue Star because it delivers what customers are asking for: a natural, meadow-like look with dependable performance.”

Kalimeris is a reliable, no-fuss bloomer that’s outstanding in groups or scattered among other perennials. And it has a fine texture that elevates the plants around it.

These concepts also apply to the sales floor. “Create a group of five to nine plants so the airy habit stands out. Use contrasting foliage, like grasses, to give the plants even more pop,” Alison said. Pollinators also love this plant, so use signage to show it’s a pollinator favorite.

Shifting the focus from individual plants to the bigger picture can help excite consumers about the possibilities in their landscape. **GP**

Kalimeris incisa Blue Star. Photo courtesy of Prides Corners.

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