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True Colors: Whose Hues to Choose?

John Friel



The long-awaited Pantone Color of the Year has dropped. The winner: Pink. Or, as Pantone calls it, Living Coral, a.k.a. Pantone 16-1546.

I find myself poking fun at fewer things as the years pass, or at least at different things, but the breathless prose swaddling each new COY remains an irresistible target.

We're all guilty of anthropomorphizing. We do it with our pets, cars and computers, which makes a modicum of sense since those things interact with us, often in eerily human ways.

But a color? The outer surface of a garment, minivan, flowerpot or throw pillow? It takes a vivid imagination to assign human-like emotions to a paint can's contents. Pantone's wordsmiths rise exuberantly to the challenge every year.

Living Coral, per Pantone's press release, "embraces us with warmth and nourishment (and) provide(s) comfort and buoyancy." Wait, there's more! It's "sociable and spirited ... animated and life-affirming ... nurturing ... convivial, (with) humanizing and heartening qualities." Still hungry? It also "welcomes and encourages lighthearted activity" and "embodies our desire for playful expression." Wow.

Is it a color, or a daycare center? If 16-1546 were a person, it'd be a mashup of the best qualities of Mr. Rogers, Oprah, the Partridge Family and your mom, played by Tom Hanks with a Vanna White smile. It would do yoga. You'd want to live in its neighborhood.

See? Dissing the COY is good sport. Easy pickings. But we green industry types ignore it at our peril.

We are, increasingly, slaves to color, and influencers everywhere pay rapt attention to what new hues spew from the world's paint guns, looms, cosmetics mills and kilns. Pantone has set the tone for 20 years.

Once you get over the bloviation, 14-1546 is a very good color. Warm and pleasant, it conjures—to my eye—sunsets, ripe apricots and umbrella drinks. Good times.

Choosing a Something Of The Year is by nature somewhat fraught. Whether it's Time Magazine's Person of the Year, the Best Picture Oscar, Motor Trends' Car of the Year or, closer to home, the Perennial Plant Association's Perennial Plant of the Year, you can't please 'em all. I've griped about some PPA picks, even when I was on the Board nominating finalists for a members vote.

The PPOY is at least a democratic choice; the COY descends like a fiat from some fashion Valhalla to a waiting

black and white world. The word appears and voilà! We're Dorothy, waking up in Oz. It says here, embrace it.

Because even if you hate, say, Stachys Hummelo or Living Coral, you want it, and colors that work with it, on your shelves. Because it'll be everywhere, getting lots of press. Garden center customers will be looking for what rhymes with it.

As Ball Pub Editor Ellen Wells points out, annual growers have a range to choose from, especially impatiens and geraniums. Perennial growers have many options. Agastache Kudos Coral, Astilbe Delft Lace and Lewisia Little Peach come to mind, and Heuchera Southern Comfort is a gimme. Less intuitive is Miscanthus Fire Dragon, whose blades segue through coral en route to blazing red.

I'll stop there. Color isn't my forte; I'm more of a color commentator.

We in the green industries are luckier than fashionistas in one sense. When hot colors lose their luster, they're done. Think how ubiquitous teal was in the '90s. Car dealers were back-ordering teal cars. Seen any lately? By contrast, every PPA POY pick is still selling.

I vehemently reject the notion that we sell mere ornaments or compete for "entertainment" dollars. But we're not immune to fads and fashions. Make them your allies. **GP**

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