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## Gift Plants

### PLANT GIFTS/PLANT TRENDS

Every year about this time one of the big garden wholesalers sends me a box of tiny perennial plants to try in my home garden. These plants, which are mostly hybrids, are either new to the market or new to the particular wholesaler's inventory. The vendor always includes an evaluation form to be submitted at the end of the first year. In the meantime, my job is to get acquainted with and possibly write about some or all of the test specimens.

I love receiving these tiny test plants. Over the years I have gotten some real winners, as well as a few that just don't seem up to Zone 6 conditions. Perhaps the best thing about this horticultural gift is that it is a living compendium of current trends in gardening. This year's assortment is no different.

Agastache 'Raspberry Summer' and Sedum spectabile 'Hot Stuff' represent a couple of important trends—drought tolerance and bird and butterfly friendliness. Agastache is sometimes referred to as "hummingbird mint", and the nickname is a clue to its increasing popularity. In typical minty fashion, agastache is vigorous and floriferous. 'Raspberry Summer', a hybrid, grows between two and three feet tall, with rosy pink blooms. It will form clumps, but does not spread as rambunctiously as some other mints. The sedum also has bright pink flowers and glossy green succulent leaves. 'Hot Stuff' is shorter in stature than the old favorite, Sedum spectabile 'Autumn Joy', and will not grow taller than ten inches. The stalks won't flop over and the plant is perfect for container gardening.

Over the past ten years plants with multi-colored leaves have become fixtures in garden centers and catalogs. Many of these technicolor wonders are shade tolerant descendants of woodland natives, evidence of yet another contemporary horticultural preoccupation. My package contained 'Mahogany', a new heuchera, plus 'Tapestry' and 'Alabama Sunrise', both of which are heucherellas. A heucherella is not simply a heuchera that has been dressed up, Cinderella-fashion, for a ball at the local nursery. It is, in fact, a cross between two shade-loving species, heuchera and tiarella. The new heuchera and heucherella all bear pleasant, if somewhat insignificant flowers; the leaves are the real story.

'Alabama Sunrise' has the hotter-than-hot chartreuse foliage, accented with red markings in the center of each leaf. Its sibling, 'Tapestry', sports medium green leaves with dusky purple leaf markings. In both cases, leaf color changes somewhat over the course of the growing season. As you might expect, 'Mahogany', the heuchera, has leathery, dark reddish-brown leaves. Over the last few years I have seen large container plantings that combine several different heuchera or heucherella to create a tapestry of colorful foliage.

Also among the test specimens are three descendants of tough, hardy American native plants. Coreopsis or tickseed is a familiar, sun loving member of the daisy family. The most common varieties sport scores of small yellow or gold, daisy-like blossoms. 'Moonlight', a variety of the species *Coreopsis verticillata*, has been around for a long time. It is a reliable low grower with primrose-yellow flowers and if it is happy, it will spread in a genteel fashion. The other coreopsis in my package is a newer variety called Gold Nugget, which appears to have the same growth habit as 'Moonlight'. The flowers appear to be a shade darker with the added attraction of red centers. In the past I have had bad luck with new, bi-colored coreopsis varieties, a couple of which have been unable to withstand normal winters here in Zone 6. The label on Gold Nugget claims that it is hardy to -10 F. I'll give it a try, but I'll install it in a protected space.

My other native American is a new penstemon called 'Dark Towers'. This plant is part of the trend towards dark stems and foliage that has brought the classic dahlia, 'Bishop of Llandaff', back to popularity and created a ready market for the new agastache 'Black Adder'. Penstemons are related to annual snapdragons, with similarly-shaped flowers. At thirty-six inches tall, 'Dark Towers' fits into the middle of the sunny border or bed.

The pink blooms contrast nicely with the leaves.

In other years the test packages have contained at least three tropical plants, because gardeners were in the process of rediscovering their dramatic outdoor impact. I think that gardeners in cold winter areas have now also discovered that it is a pain to haul lots of tropical specimens into and out of the house when the seasons change. I suspect that is why my current package contained only one tropical plant, a rhizomatous begonia called 'Black Taffeta'. 'Black Taffeta's' flowers are pretty much a non-event, but its leaves are the hyper-fashionable purple-black. I hope it is an extremely tough plant because I might as well have a sign on my forehead that reads, "Begonia Killer."

All my fashionable baby plants will go into the ground today and tomorrow. I'll do my best to keep them alive. Who knows? Maybe one of them will become a new garden classic.

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