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FERTILE MIND

Coneflower varieties enliven garden

By JAN WIESE-FALES

Published Sunday, July 20, 2008

Echinacea purpurea, commonly known as purple coneflower, is an American wildflower growing throughout Missouri and several other Midwestern and Eastern states. The plant's attractive, daisy-like blooms feature pink-purple petals that form a down-turned, skirt around a central orange spiky cone. This carefree, prolific plant easily transitioned from the prairie to the flower patch, and over time, several improved cultivars such as Magnus have become commercially available, largely replacing the common Cinderella in flower gardens.

Coneflower is easy to grow. Butterflies love its blooms, and its tasty seeds attract birds, especially goldfinches. The plant is drought- and deer-resistant, and it is extremely long-lived. And it looks great in bouquets.

In recent years, fairy godmother hybridizers such as Jim Ault at the Chicago Botanic Garden, Dutch garden designer Piet Oudouf, the Saul Brothers of Atlanta, Arie Bloom of the Netherland's AB Cultivars, and Oregon's Terra Nova Nurseries have waved their pollen wands and decked Cinderella out for the ball in an array of hybridized finery.

From the vivid fuchsia, pink-purple blooms of Oudouf's new Fatal Attraction, with petals that spin out around its cone like a ballerina's tutu, to the narrow, buttery-yellow-colored reflexive skirt and mounded green-yellow cone of fragrant Mango, one of Ault's introductions, Echinacea has gone from informal garden maid to the belle of the ball.

Itsaul Plants, the plant-breeding venture of Bobby and Richard Saul, has gone Cone Crazy with the fantastic Big Sky Series that includes the recent introduction Summer Sky, the first bi-color coneflower. This flower, with peach-colored petals that transition to a rose halo around its cone, is one of the several striking new cultivars by

Caroline Dohack



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9	2	5	8		6	1
				1	2	
2			1	5		
	1	2	6	5	3	
6	3					1
	4	8				
2	7		4	9	8	3
8				6	4	2

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the Sauls, all in bright colors with names such as Twilight, Sundown and Harvest Moon. Most are pleasantly scented to boot, a value-added feature in many of the appealing new coneflower varieties.

One of AB Cultivar's Cone-fections is featured on the back cover of the Park Seeds' fall planting catalog that appeared in my mailbox this week. Coconut Lime's delicious blooms look like yellow bon-bons with pale-green ruffles. It is the "white" version of breeder Bloom's first introduction.

Until now, I have been satisfied with my wildflower echinacea and have watched with rising interest and financial restraint as the annually increasing number of lovely new varieties has appeared in the pages of garden catalogs. But Terra Nova's team of plant scientists has come up with a hybrid that I don't think I can live without. Tiki Torch is a 2008 introduction with killer orange-yellow petals and a large domed red-orange cone. I'm betting I'm not the only gardener who has been enchanted by this new beauty and that it might take a few years for supply to catch up with demand.

Far more than just a pretty face, echinacea has been used medicinally for years, first by many American Indian tribes and then gradually by American settlers until in 1887, when John King included it in his American Dispensatory and it was introduced to a broader audience. Over the years, the plant has been touted as a cure for everything from snakebite to the common cold, and it is the latter that has placed the plant on center stage among modern herbal remedies.

Literally hundreds of studies have been done to see whether echinacea does, indeed, have an effect on colds, with a wide variety of findings both positive and negative. Last year, the University of Connecticut released findings from a meta-analysis that looked at 14 clinical trials of actual people and concluded that coneflower not only reduces the chance of getting a cold by a whopping 58 percent, but it also shortens the duration of colds by 1.4 days.

The bad news part of this good news is that there are a number of viruses that cause colds and that not all of them respond equally as well to echinacea. Additionally, a 2004 Consumer Reports study found that the amount of echinacea in the different brands of cold remedies varied widely.

But there is no guesswork involved in using coneflower varieties new and old to brighten up and enliven flowerbeds, and I'm prescribing myself one for next year's garden season.

Jan Wiese-Fales is a Master Gardener who lives and pulls weeds at Mole Hill in rural Howard County. Reach her at fertilemind@sbcglobal.net.

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