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Striking coral bells are a North Texas gardening sensation

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By **BILL SCHEICK** / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

Coral bells, also known by their botanical name, *Heuchera*, may be low-to-the-ground perennials native to North American woodlands and mountains, but lately they also are a gardening sensation.

Hybridizers, including a Dallas company, have been busy the last few years playing with the native plant's genes, flooding the market with multihued – sometimes bizarrely so – new varieties. Sometimes the hues of these evergreen, heart-shaped leaves change in response to seasonal variations in light and temperature.

The appeal of some, not all, heuchera (pronounced HEW-ker-ruh) varieties as bedding plants is further enhanced by delicate flower spikes studded with tiny bells. The pink-to-red ones, including the Southwest native *Heuchera sanguinea* (requiring alkaline soil), are hummingbird magnets. The current clamor, however, is over the plant's leaves, ranging from chartreuse and caramel to lilac and near-black as well as variegated forms; the flower spikes of most of the newest hybrids are beside the point.

Heuchera gardeners might be surprised, though, by a plant propagator's idea of what is most challenging about coral bells. For Charles Oliver, heuchera pioneer and owner of Primrose Path Nursery in Pennsylvania, creating new selections of coral bells is hardly a problem. That's because the 35 to 50 coral bells species found in the wild interbreed easily on their own. "In fact, the first heuchera hybrids I grew were from chance crosses by bees," Oliver says.

The problem, he says, is inventing good names for his new coral bells selections. "Sometimes we have invited friends over and taken them out into the garden to get their suggestions after a couple of glasses of wine." Unfortunately, he admits, "this hasn't been very productive, since they usually come up with silly names."

With or without the assistance of wine, heuchera growers in North Central Texas face different challenges. With good drainage, coral bells can easily survive our region's cold, pests and drought. But unamended clay soil kills them, cautions Dan Heims, prolific heuchera breeder and president of Terra Nova Nurseries in Oregon, a wholesale grower.

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Photos courtesy of Proven Winners
Specializing in odd colors and striking patterns, the recent Dolce series of coral bells, also known as *Heuchera*, expands a gardener's palette.

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Heucheras insist on excellent drainage and acidic soil rich in organic matter.



Heims recommends that North Central Texas gardeners work compost into the soil to lighten the clay; expanded shale, sold locally by the bag or in bulk, is a permanent amendment.

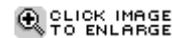
For heucheras grown in containers, Heims advises, avoid typical peat-heavy potting soil. Dallas organic expert Howard Garrett has a well-draining formula you mix yourself. It is composed of 30 percent compost, 30 percent coconut fiber, 15 percent decomposed granite, 15 percent expanded shale, 5 percent alfalfa meal, 4 percent lava sand and 1 percent greensand.

Water coral bells only when the soil is dry, and feed them rarely – at most with a slow-release 16-5-9 formula in roughly four-month intervals. Take care not to bury a coral bells' rosette crown, and consult each selection's label for shade requirements, which vary depending on the plant's parentage. During our summers, most heucheras will not tolerate direct exposure to afternoon sun.

The biggest problem with growing coral bells locally is our humid heat. "Heucheras are mostly bred for regions north of Texas and so do best in cooler, more moderate climates," says Kent Kratz, vice president of research and development at Casa Flora, a Dallas wholesale grower specializing in ferns and coral bells via tissue culture.

If used locally as in-ground plants, he says, "it might be better to consider them winter annuals." When planted in an amended bed, "heucheras can become colorful textural counterpoints to pansies, violas, kale, alyssum and other winter-growing plants."

During our winters, "cooler conditions coupled with reduced watering practices in amended clay soil bring out the colors on unblemished heuchera leaves," Kratz says. On the other hand, "our summer conditions of bright light, high heat, drying winds and wet soil conspire to scar heuchera leaves and rob them of their vibrant colors."



Even if you succeed in nursing an in-ground heuchera through the summer, it likely won't live up to its northern reputation as a robust perennial. Locally, many coral bell selections tend to become fatally stressed.

Are there steps North Texas gardeners can take to successfully cultivate heucheras as permanent front-of-the-border color? Jimmy Turner, senior director of gardens at the Dallas Arboretum and Botanical Gardens, suggests looking for cultivars and hybrids of *H. villosa*, also known as hairy alumroot. This hardy, large-leafed and supertough native of regions east of the Mississippi River loves shade, tolerates dryness, shares space with tree roots and companions well with many other plants, including hostas. Its rare flowers tend to be negligible, but the attractive whitish fuzz on its spectacular leaves and stems enables the plant to cope with our heat and humidity.

Turner's trial list of long-lasting in-ground *H. villosa* cultivars is headed by 'Brownies', 'Caramel', 'Citronelle', 'Georgia Peach' and 'Mocha'. Next in preference, based on how they performed at the arboretum's trial plot, are 'Mahogany', 'Obsidian' and 'Southern Comfort' – an ample sample of coral bells to try in the ground. That said, Turner also makes good use of the wildly colorful foliage of other hybrids in the arboretum's large mixed containers.

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