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March 2011

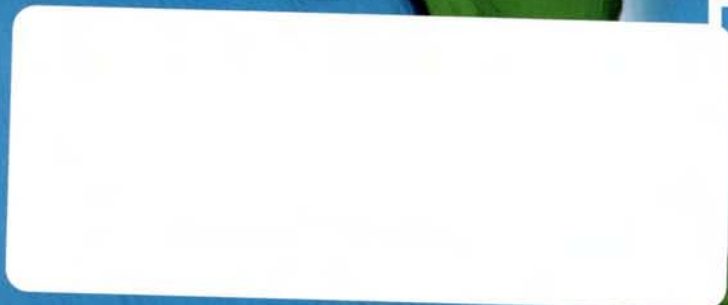
# gardencenter®

SMART IDEAS FOR INDEPENDENT RETAILERS | MAGAZINE



## Pre-season Forecast

Ready or not, here spring comes! What will it bring for your business? p. 12



VOLUME 17 / NO. 3 / MARCH 2011

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SMART IDEAS FOR INDEPENDENT RETAILERS | MAGAZINE



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# WeIRD plants that sell

BY CHRIS BERG

These plants are unusual enough to create interest among consumers and mainstream enough to make retailers some money

When you hear the term “weird or unusual plants” what comes to mind? Do you think of those bizarre botanicals that are more likely to appear in an issue of National Geographic than seasonal mail-order catalogs? Some of the more unusual plants you’re not likely to see in your neighborhood garden center include: corpse flower (*Amorphophallus titanum*), which has a smell like rotting meat; giant gunnera (*Gunnera manicata*) with the world’s largest leaves; or plants with distinctive parts like the nipple fruit (*Solanum mammosum*).

Rethinking this concept of weird

or unusual plants reminded me of a conversation I had with one of my mentors very early in my career. Walking through some plant trials with PanAmerican Seed breeder Blair Winner, he was showing me his latest creations, including some rather odd ones.

He asked me, “Do you like this?” I told him I did. He then asked me, “Would you buy this?” After pausing a moment, I answered, “Probably not.”

That was a pivotal conversation during which I realized that as a plant geek it’s fun to grow some of these novelty plants in my own garden. However, it’s my professional role to

find fun plants that will have commercial acceptance by consumer, grower and retailer. I consider the following plants to be unusual enough to create interest among consumers and mainstream enough to make retailers some money along the way.

## ALOE VARIEGATA GATOR

Get it? Alogator. Not your typical, old-fashioned *Aloe vera* that consumers turn to in mid-summer to cure an afternoon sans sunscreen. Gator sports a unique, reptilelike color pattern on the leaves. Its habit is also unique with a tight triangular plant that keeps growing upward, stacking triads of leaves, one over the next. Once established, Gator sends out numerous pups around the perimeter, filling the container it’s in. This is a must-have plant for rock gardens and for patio containers.

## PETUNIA HYBRIDA BLACK VELVET, SUPERTUNIA PRETTY MUCH PICASSO

Are petunias really unique plants? They can be. In the last two years the industry has had two rather remarkable introductions that are not only completely innovative to the genus, but have excellent retail potential.

Supertunia Pretty Much Picasso from Proven Winners has had a full year at the retail level with huge success. While it may not have the overall flower power of others in the series, the unique chartreuse on violet has been an indisputable hit among female consumers.

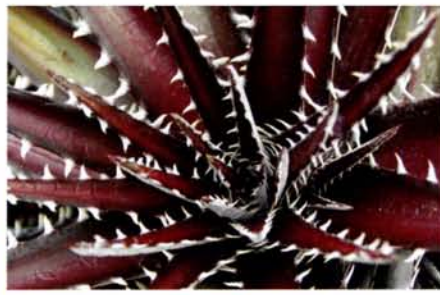
Last year Black Velvet was introduced by Ball FloraPlant. What doesn’t look good with black? This striking introduction will make a bold statement in a retail display. It will also make a dramatic presentation mixed in combination containers with contrasting companion plants.

## ACER PALMATUM ‘RYUSEN’

If you’re a plant enthusiast, then ItSaul Plants is a nursery you should visit. Like Bobby Saul, each of his introductions has something truly unique to offer. This new Japanese maple is the first weeping variety with palmate



Left: *Aloe variegata* Gator, Right: Black Velvet and Supertunia Pretty Much Picasso petunias



Above: *Acer palmatum* 'Ryusen.' Center column (top to bottom): *Dyckia* hybrid 'Burgundy Ice,' *Roscoea* Spice Island, *Portulaca molokiniensis* Maraca. Right column (top to bottom): *Kalanchoe synsepala* Gremlin, *Ptilotus* hybrid Platinum Wallaby.

leaves on the market.

The adaptable plant can be trained up to 20 feet tall. You can train the plant to your desired height and then just let it cascade from there. Alternatively, the plant could be trained along the edge of a wall and allowed to drape down. Fall foliage is a beautiful orange-red.

#### ROSCOEIA SPICE ISLAND

From another one of the industry's best plant geeks, Dan Heims at Terra Nova Nurseries, comes a new hardy ginger for perennial gardens. Spice Island has dense clumps of dark leaves and showy, thick, deep-red stems. Its bright-purple, orchid-like flowers appear in mid-summer.

*Roscoea* grows best in a cool woodland location, either in the ground or in containers. It is hardy in USDA Hardiness Zones 6-9.

#### PORTULACA MOLOKINIENSIS MARACA

Maraca is a recent succulent introduc-

tion from EuroAmerican Propagators. It produces vertical stems with tightly packed whorls of frosty green foliage. The unusual plant can be used as specimen in large containers or as a landscape plant. In late summer Maraca produces bright-yellow, waxy flowers at the tip of each stem.

#### DYCKIA HYBRID 'BURGUNDY ICE'

'Burgundy Ice' has rich burgundy leaves with silver spines that are real attention grabbers. Beautiful from a distance, but don't try to touch it. It can be planted in the ground where it produces a dense, mounded rosette. I find it is much more striking in containers, where the leaves can freely arch over the edge.

#### KALANCHOE SYNSEPALA GREMLIN

This new succulent from EuroAmerican Propagators has bright, lime-green leaves with scalloped, burgundy margins. Numerous little gizmos protrude from the center of the plant on long

wiry stems. Fun to use in containers and hanging baskets, where the pups bounce in the wind.

#### PTILOLOTUS HYBRID PLATINUM WALLABY

Platinum Wallaby is a fun and unusual plant for waterwise gardening.

It is a different species than Joey from Benary, which opened up this genus to the industry. Platinum Wallaby is a perennial plant living about three years in appropriate climates.

*Ptilotus* is an Australian native that can take incredibly dry conditions once it is established. This remarkable plant never stops blooming, producing many large pink feathery flowers year-round in mild climates like in southern California. ☞

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