

IN THE GARDEN

What the Nurseries Like for Spring



Steve Legato for The New York Times

The Mid-Atlantic Nursery Trade Show in Baltimore earlier this month.

By ANNE RAVER

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IT'S too bad that nursery trade shows aren't open to the public, because they are far more exciting than flower shows. Instead of fantasy landscapes forced into bloom, a trade show has the energy of an international marketplace, where growers discuss the fine points of their new favorites — plants like Citronelle, a lime-green heuchera that can stand up to heat and humidity; or new hibiscuses like Plum Crazy and Copper King, which tolerate dry soil and are hardy to 30 below zero; or the rarest of plants, like a bonsai metasequoia, also known as dawn redwood, which grows only three inches a year, making it perfect for a pot on your patio.

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Photographs by Steve Legato for The New York Times; Becky Long (hibiscus); Harold David (heuchera)

ON OFFER Plants at the Mid-Atlantic

These new heucheras, hibiscuses and dwarf evergreens were three of the big sellers at the Mid-Atlantic Nursery Trade Show at the Baltimore Convention Center from Jan. 9 through 11, where retailers were ordering for spring.

Growers said that gardeners' desire for low maintenance favors plants that stand up to tough conditions without a lot of special care. Small gardens and patio plantings in pots are also more popular, which leads to more interest in new kinds of dwarf plants.

"That bonsai metasequoia is the rarest plant we grow," said

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Nursery Trade Show in Baltimore earlier this month, top far left, included, clockwise from top left: Edgeworthia chrysantha; the Plum Crazy hibiscus; the Citronelle heuchera; a yellow Hinoki false cypress and a blue-green Colorado spruce; a Chocolate Mint coleus; and the Charity mahonia.

George Smith, the sales manager of Blue Sterling Nursery of Bridgeton, N.J., which produces unusual trees and evergreens, many of them dwarfs.

The bonsai, no bigger than a lunchbox, sat in a forest of other rare potted trees, including Dragon's Eye pine, which has a burst of gold inside each clump of dark green needles,

and Golden Whorl, a dwarf Hinoki false cypress with fringe-like golden foliage. There were classic golden Hinokis, like Crippsi, and miniature blue spruces like Montgomery, which will take years to reach two feet, and Mary's Broom, which grows to only 10 inches.

Drought tolerance is also important in the marketplace this year.

Sedums and fragrant creeping thymes are being marketed as "Steppables," "Jeepers Creepers" and "Treadwells," because these old-fashioned plants have been rediscovered for their ability to take beating sun and very little water. They will ramble over that bare slope where the grass can't grow, or creep between pavers on the patio, or stones in the garden path.

I saw a lot of tough prairie plants being bred to flower more profusely, in a wider range of colors.

"We're really excited about the new baptisias out of Chicago Botanic Garden," said Steven Castorani, a co-owner of North Creek Nurseries, which specializes in native plants, in Landenberg, Pa.

They were developed by James R. Ault, the adventurous botanist at the Chicago Botanic Garden. He has transformed Baptisia australis, or false indigo, a prairie native with pea-like blue flowers and soft blue-green foliage, into a plant of many colors: lemon and gold (Solar Flare), dusky violet and white (Starlite), burgundy tipped with gold (Twilite) and deep blue (Midnight).

These new varieties have not lost what they learned on the prairie: they need very little water, they have no diseases or pests, and they attract butterflies like mad.

Even heucheras, commonly known as coral bells, are being bred to take sun, drought, even humidity. And they are being marketed as pot plants and ground covers. They billowed from countless booths, in oranges and corals, silvery greens, wine and near-black.

"We're in the middle of a huge container craze now, and I like to say that heucheras play well with others," said Dan Heims, the president of Terra Nova Nurseries in Canby, Ore., which breeds cutting-edge perennials, including top-selling heuchera, many on view in Baltimore.

"We've seen sweet potato vines ad nauseam, and they always kill everything else in the pot," Mr. Heims said.

He was referring to Blackie, that ubiquitous near-black potato vine, and Margarita, a lime-green one, which stole our hearts a few years ago. So move over, Blackie. Mr. Heims has a heuchera called Obsidian that can take heat and humidity. Bronze Wave, another dark horse, can take full sun.

But Mr. Heims's own Lime Rickey, a chartreuse, which does well on the West Coast, hasn't stood up to the East Coast's high humidity and droughts.

So it has been upstaged this year by Citronelle, a bright chartreuse introduced by a French



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breeder, Thierry Delabroye, who drew on *Heuchera villosa*, a native of the American Southeast, to create fuzzy foliage that can take both drought and humidity.

Coleus is bigger than ever: Chocolate Mint has six-inch, velvety brown leaves, edged in chartreuse. Winter-blooming mahonias, or grape hollies, are catching on: Charity has fragrant yellow flowers.

Camellias are selling well, too. Once thought of as southern shrubs, varieties like Pink Icicle and Winter Snowman are hardy to 10 below zero. And now, thanks to warmer winters, a fragrant shrub that blooms in winter, *Edgeworthia chrysantha*, the paper bush, is making its way as far north as New York City.

I left the show with an optimistic feeling: maybe the gloom and doom of [global warming](#) and high fuel costs have given us gardeners a road map to smaller, hardier gardens that give back to, rather than take from, the earth.

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