

With all of the breeding work being done, there is really no reason for any gardener out there to have any difficulty finding plants to play in the dirt with. Whether those plants gardeners are searching for are the latest and greatest or the best old standards, check with the area's quality garden centers – they are striving to fill the needs for annual plants. So what is going to be “hot” this year? Color in foliage. Color and scent in flowers. And I'm looking forward to seeing more tropical plants available to fill our landscapes with outlandishly huge and interesting leaves.

Color in foliage. Look for the new *Iresine* or *Perilla* plants. These plants really became popular a few years ago with the mainstream availability of *Perilla* “Magilla.” Some gardeners loved it, some not so much. However you felt about it, it offered something different – a diversion from concentration on floral color only to the addition of interesting and appealing foliage. Last year, *Iresine* Blazin' Rose,” was all over the place. If you were out and about at all, you couldn't miss seeing those pretty leaf shades of deep maroon to pink.

This year, the new one available is “Blazin' Lime.” The color is as you would expect – very lime. As an added bonus to the variegated lime colored leaves, the stems present a funky contrast in red. I had an opportunity to see these in the University of Georgia trial garden setting and they were spectacular in form and color. “Blazin' Rose” was about 3 feet tall and a bit wider, “Blazin' Lime” was about the same. Up in this neck of the woods, expect a good 2 feet. The color on both of mine held very well throughout the season. Be sure to get the pinching back done early in the growing season to encourage good strong branching otherwise the plants have a tendency to develop a rather weak and spindly branching structure. Full sun to partial shade in well-drained soil is best.

Another upright lime foliage plant that works very well is *Solenostemon* “Lime Velvet” (coleus). This one has fantastic coloring in addition to all of the traditional ease of coleus. Plant in sites typical for coleus and you will be fine. Check the *Acalyphas* out because you will find incredible leaf colors of burgundy, copper, and yellows. This species has been around for a while but just finding their way into the greenhouses and our hearts. *Acalypha wilkesiana*

“Kona Coast” is beautiful – a very bold and striking yellow-green variegation that can make almost any plant combination or container pop. Full sun in well-drained soil is a must for optimal performance.

One of my absolute favorites over the past three years (that will hopefully be found in the greenhouses and garden centers this year) is *Manihot esculenta* “Variegata” (variegated tapioca). This tropical plant has an understated impact within its calming coloration – cream and green variegation on deeply indented, palmate foliage with pretty reddish pink petioles and stems. It is a tropical so be sure to put it outside only after temps are above 50 degrees F. at night or you will get cold damage.

Although *Manihot* loves full sun, a bit of shade will be tolerated. If the shade is too heavy, the leaf canopy will develop a bit thin and weak. Wet feet are not welcome, if you want it to survive. *Begonias* are always a great summer plant for this area – just watch as these plants get better and better. In the past few years, one segment of *Begonia* breeding focus has been on the development of gorgeous foliage. Color combinations that make your eyes really happy, forms that will provide extreme interest in containers or planting beds, and wow! – even some sun tolerance – it's all happening. This year, some of the phenomenal choices should be more widely available. Check with your trusted plant provider to properly place as some will still do best in shade while others will thrive in full sun.

Color and scent in flowers. Color first. You know the saying – what's old is new again. Well, in the plant world it is no different. A native from Australia imported into the U.S. almost 20 years ago – *Scaevola* quickly developed some loyal fans. If you haven't given this one a whirl, do so this year, it's worth a grow. *Scaevola aemula* “Cajun Blue” (fan flower) is one of the prettiest blue flowers I have seen. And get this - every time it got really hot – that plant just laughed it off and grew better. It will do beautifully if given very well-drained soil and full sun. The only time *Scaevola* suffers is when the feet are wet.

*Cuphea* (Mexican heather) has so many forms that you can take your pick. Reds, lavenders, soft tones, vibrant

colors, low, and tall - I have tried many and they all perform wonderfully in our heat and humidity when sited in well-drained soils and in full sun. Don't expect much early in the spring as they really come into full glory during the summer. My plants will tough out our summers and look really good until frost.

*Heliotropium* (heliotrope) has been an on-again-off-again garden darling - making it another of those wonderful plants that has been making people happy for hundreds of years. The name means turning toward the sun, and yes, it does do that - making it a good plant to "research" while sipping summer beverages with fellow gardeners. While we often look to heliotrope for color, I love it for the wonderful scent.

I tried *Heliotropium arborescens* "Wanda Repp" last year at the insistence of my friend, and fantastic plantsman, Allan Armitage, and once again - he was right to insist that I try it. "Wanda Repp" is a winning plant. Full, sturdy branching form, leaves of medium bright green, the flowers are a very light lavender color, and the scent is nicely sweet and soft, not overpowering. In the past twenty years or so, the focus on heliotrope breeding has been for color improvements. The results have been some great deep, rich colors but along the way, something had to give. In this case it was the scent. It's good to see (well, smell, really) that some of the past is coming forward. Grow these in either full sun (watch the moisture) or partial shade - all sitting should be in well-drained soils.

*Phlox* have endured a love/hate relationship with many gardeners, resulting in (unfortunately) the selection of annual *Phlox* often being ignored. What a shame! There are two series that have performed very well in high heat and humidity - *Phlox drummondii* "Astoria" and *Phlox drummondii* "Intensia." Both series have unbelievable flower colors (white, purples, and pinks), intensity, and vibrancy in a healthy looking plant with no foliage spotting or discoloration. And get this - no powdery mildew! Give them a try in a full sun, well-drained situation.

Tropicals - if you haven't used them in your garden, why not? Often available at ridiculously low prices, they make great additions to the outdoor landscape and can be brought indoors if you become attached to them. I'm not talking about *Colocasia* and *Alocasia* only. Consider all of those big, leafy houseplants - so many choices, so little room in the garden. After air temperatures get above 50 degrees F., they can be easily planted either directly in the ground or just dig a hole and drop the entire container right in. Think exotic and dare to make an interesting architectural statement.