

Annual Success

THE ALL-STARS

I started my gardening career with an annual, I clearly remember that plant, a yellow Pocket Book Calceolaria, It lasted a mere couple of weeks, even in the cool dampness of the Cornish summer. It was smothered with attention; I realize now too much. It promptly gave up life much to my dismay; I was only six. A month ago I sowed a package of Calceolaria in the college greenhouse in anticipation of great things; the same story told to my senior students of how this annual introduced me to a career that I have been practising for over fifteen years. They, as I once did, monitor the seedlings progress daily and much to their and my dismay, the young Calceolaria plants are a pathetic bunch; I have to conclude that they must be a difficult plant and are best relegated to the expert touch, which I as a professional in the eyes of the Calceolaria obviously do not have.



The search for new and entertaining plants is always a challenge for the gardener today. To be the first to have that unique specimen, especially if it is a plant that is effortless to grow, is an age-old pursuit of the dedicated gardener fostered by generations before us. The 'annual' scene was once passé; it was the fools that planted Marigolds and Petunias, Cosmos and Portulacca. The refined and knowledgeable individual pursued the perennial, the tree and the shrub with passion and dedication, however for the last several years annuals have been the conductors of the garden symphony, the statesman that holds court in all their finery grace pot, patio and even planting bed with unblemished abandoned. We have come full circle and are now replanting what our Victorian forefathers once called bedding out. Tropicalissimo is the catch phrase today, plantings reinforced with exotic Cannas, Coleus and Potato Vine are the expected concert of the dedicated and knowledgeable gardener.

To add to that exotic flair of that bygone era this year consider some of the winners from the All America Selection (AAS) trial gardens, new annuals that have proven performance across the United States and Canada. AAS winners are independently trialed throughout North America and are rated by an expert panel of Judges for characteristics such as earliness, bloom period, disease, pest tolerance, novel colours, flower forms, and overall performance. Only plants receiving an outstanding rating from the judges are given the designation as an AAS winner.

There are a number of winners each year, both vegetables and annuals, being a self proclaimed connoisseur of annuals I decided to refine the selection even further for you and having total disregard for vegetables (I have friends who are passionate and generous vegetable gardeners) decided to limit my evaluations to four of the best of the best of 2003 and 2004.

Rudbeckia hirta 'Prairie Sun', with flower form typical to members of its clan it is the unique colour, a combination of gold and primrose and a lime green central cone, that distinguishes it from similar cultivars such as 'Irish Eyes' and 'Indian Summer'. 'Prairie Sun' flowers prolifically from about late June until hard frosts claim the garden and although it may survive a mild winter it is best treated as an annual. Reaching a height of 36" it may be combined to full effect with ornamental grass such as Helictotrochen, Calamagrostis and Miscanthus, while plants such as Perovskia and Blue Mist Spiraea are regal companions for that sunny border planting.



We are all familiar with the baby's breath used in flower arrangements, a plant best suited to bridal bouquets since it has the long legs. Enter the annual cousin, a short stemmed deep rose coloured plant that thrives wherever you would grow impatiens. Treat it to a location near the front of plantings since it will reach a bare 12". Combined with Bacopa, Dusty Miller and Purple Leaved Plectranthus it is sure to be one of those gems that will turn your gardening neighbours green with envy.

I have never been a fan of Petunias, I considered the plant uncultured and unsophisticated, much like the brash, overbearing guest someone brings to your party. The 'Calypso' series we all try to forget, those red and white-stripped affairs that looked like they came from the circus have given this plant the reputation of the clown of the garden. Nowadays, however the Petunia has redeemed itself, new varieties with smaller flowers and subtle shades refurbish a sense of regality to this poor plant. Worthy of consideration this year now is Petunia 'Merlin Blue Morn'.

'Merlin Blue Morn' is a pale blue, large flowered Petunia with a white center, quite unique in the world of Petunias since most are singled coloured. 'Merlin Blue Morn' is best suited to hanging baskets and planters where it will have some benefit of a sheer drop to display its finery. Combine this plant with perennials such as Coreopsis 'Moonbeam' and Artemisia 'Powis Castle' for stellar patio pots. In baskets you might consider growing it with Lysimachia nummularia 'Aurea' the golden form of Creeping Jenny and Lamiastrum 'Herman's Pride', the Yellow Archangel.



The star last year, the gold medal recipient, the highest honour an annual plant can receive in the AAS was 'Purple Majesty' Ornamental millet, *Pennisetum glaucum* 'Purple Majesty'. Millet to me is akin to growing corn in the garden and I trialed this plant last year with some trepidation, however, it was a show-stopper, and inevitably once a week someone would ask what that plant was on my corner lot. Growing to about 2m in height and forming a clump of 75cm in breadth, 'Purple Majesty' is the punctuation point in the garden. I planted my group with a Golden Elderberry backdrop in the mixed border where it held court in its purple finery the entire season. I may try some Golden Lemon Balm, *Melissa officinalis* 'All Gold' this year at the base of 'Purple Majesty' since it seems to need a strong anchor. Thriving in the hot dry summer this plant is not for the timid soul, it is vocal, proud domineering and is not to everyone's tastes but since we all strive for that special plant 'Purple Majesty' may be the 'charge de'affair' that our gardens lack. That said however, it resents being held captive in a pot and is best given free root run in the open garden.

The full compliment of winners are displayed along with past AAS recipients in AAS designated display gardens such as the Royal Botanical Gardens in Burlington, Centennial Park Conservatory in Etobicoke, Niagara Parks Botanical Gardens in Niagara and The Humber Arboretum in Rexdale, Ontario. For a full listing of sites across Canada and the United States visit the AAS website at www.all-americaelections.org.

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