

New Plant Introductions: Perennials
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Not long ago I read an article penned by an esteemed garden writer offering opinions about what is hot and what is not in the gardening world. It seems as if my homemade mosaic bench, bricks and knickknacks are not only passé but déclassé. Several paragraphs later the author divulged the news that perennials, those high maintenance divas, are no longer in fashion. Relegated to the compost pile they have been supplanted by easy care shrubs. Well, the pundits and trendsetters can say what they will but frivolous, flowery perennials make my horticultural heart sing.

I don't even want to try to imagine a garden devoid of perennial floral surprises. Don't get me wrong my garden is filled with deciduous and evergreen shrubs and trees of all sizes and shapes. In my garden trees, all but one on the small side and large shrubs are the walls and ceiling creating enclosure and intimacy. Medium sized and small shrubs bring the garden down to a human scale. They form the structural backdrop of the garden. But it is the ephemeral and fleeting nature of floriferous perennials that fill me with child-like delight throughout the year. My pursuit of new perennials is relentless— perusing catalogs, devouring publications devoted to new plant introductions and scanning the internet—in search of exceptional new treasures to trial.

Last year the Chicago Botanic Garden in conjunction with Chicagoland Grows announced the introduction of Echinacea 'Art's Pride,' the first coneflower with orange petals. News traveled fast about this remarkable new plant that is the product of a breeding program at the Chicago Botanic Garden that focuses on developing varieties of popular native plants. The trademark name Orange Meadowbrite alludes to the slender orange petals and its native antecedents.

Struck with instant lust I was disappointed to learn that during its first year on the market this long awaited lovely would be available only in select Midwest garden centers and mail order catalogs. Frustrated by the inability to purchase Orange Meadowbrite locally I was delighted when a visiting hort head gifted me with one as a thank you. A spicy, orange- tea fragrance emanated from the flowers as I planted it in full sun in well-drained soil next to Penstemon 'Blue Midnight' in my gravel garden. Watch for Orange Meadowbrite and its apricot colored sport Mango Meadowbrite to appear at local nurseries this spring. Both are drought tolerant with deep-green, glossy, disease resistant foliage.

No garden should be without hardy geraniums. I am not talking about Pelargoniums, those stalwart denizens of containers and hanging baskets, but the real perennial deal with five- petaled flowers borne on dainty, clambering stems displaying luscious palmately- divided leaves. Geranium 'Orion' named after one of the brightest constellations in the night sky is a star in the summer garden. During July and August large, open, saucer-shaped brilliant blue flowers veined in violet-red dance above the finely dissected foliage. Heronswood Nursery, Plant Delights Nursery and Digging Dog Nursery offer Geranium 'Orion' in their 2005 catalogs.

I am a sucker for the genus Agastache, heat loving, drought tolerant members of the mint family. Easy to grow they present their vividly colored, tubular flowers on upright spires all summer long. The latest variety to tantalize gardeners is Agastache foeniculum 'Golden Jubilee' named in honor of the 50th anniversary of the reign of Britain's Queen Elizabeth II. New foliage is brilliant chartreuse overlaid with a yellow veneer transitioning to a summer hue of lime green which acts as a counterpoint for the blue-purple flower spikes. This plant of startling contrasts lightens up the perennial border and creates an instant focal point in a container combination.

Garden gurus can't deter me from celebrating perennial pleasures in my garden. If I live long enough I might even have the last laugh. All good soothsayers should know that the circular rhythms of fashion dictate that in the not too distant future perennials shall rise again.