

New Perennials are Worth a Look

By Donna Dillon, Alameda County Master Gardener

Spring has arrived, some rain has come and it is time to think about our gardens. Gardeners today are looking at plants differently and so are today's plant breeders. Most everyone loves color; many gardeners want to use plants that attract birds and butterflies and bees. Plants that met those requirements in the past often were too large or too picky to be in our flower beds. Today new plants are available that are not only better behaved than their parents; they can take more heat, they become drought tolerant when established, and they fit into our smaller gardens or even a container.

First up are some new salvias, penstemons, agastaches and mimulus. These long blooming, colorful and reliable plants attract one or more of the following to your garden: hummingbirds, bees, or butterflies in the larvae or adult stage. A new series of salvias called 'Heatwave' was bred in Australia. These plants--salmon pink, cream, lilac, hot pink or red-- grow 2'-3' tall and wide. More compact, dense and less brittle than other *Salvia greggiis*, these are more useful in that they can move from a background position in the flower bed to a place of prominence. These plants have a longer bloom cycle and repeat blooms occur quickly. Trim them by half after each cycle of bloom. (Sunset Zones 8-24, 26-31).



The new series of penstemons goes under the name of 'Riding Hood' and comes in hot pink, red, and Delft Blue. This tough variety has strong upright stems so it doesn't flop; it also makes a good cut flower. Plants grow to approximately 18" x 24". (Sunset Zones 1-20)

The Agastache 'Nectar' series contains plants that are more compact and free flowering. Colors include grapefruit, apricot, grape, raspberry and orange. Plants bloom from April to August and reach 18" x 16" tall. (Sunset Zones 4-24, 26, 28-34, 39)

The Mimulus 'Jelly Beans' series emerged from the hybrid work of Rich Persoff in Alameda. These hybrids are more compact and rounded in shape than their leggy parents. They also come in new colors such as, dark pink, gold, lemon yellow, orange, magenta, and white. They need partial shade if grown in inland areas. Mature size is 18" tall x 24". Like their parents (who are California natives), these mimulus do not want to be too wet or suffer from poor drainage. (Sunset 5-9, 14-24)

New Buddleias also provide long term color in the garden. With large, fragrant, lilac-like blossoms, they bloom from April until October, and they are magnets for butterflies and birds. However, traditional Buddleias are 12' x 12'. They also tend to reseed and are potentially a problem near creeks and unoccupied open spaces. Two new types of Buddleias solve some of the problems associated with growing them. These varieties are sterile. The 'Blue Chip' and 'Ice Chip' series are smaller plants with smaller blossoms. The first season they are 1-2' tall and wide, the second season they are 2-3'. They should be cut back heavily before spring growth begins. They need good drainage. They were developed in North Carolina and are said to be deer resistant. If you are unable to find them locally, they are available from Plant Delights by mail order. The 'Buddleia Buzz' series comes from Thompson and Morgan. The plants come in 5 distinct colors. The plant at maturity is 48"x 30" and the blooms are equal in size to a traditional Buddleia. These plants work as an addition to a cottage garden bed, as a background beneficial plant in a vegetable garden area or in a container. (Sunset Zones 3B, 4-9, 14-24, 28-33.)

This is far from a complete list of new introductions arriving this spring and summer. Many of these plants are grown by wholesale growers who sell to local independent nurseries and garden centers here in the Bay Area. As you make planting decisions this year, think about using a colorful long- blooming plant that fits into your space and is adapted to our climate by requiring less water and getting by with less care. Enjoy the benefits of having birds, bees, or butterflies. There are some exciting choices out there. Have a look.