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WHEN PLANTS ARE TOO HARDY

MINNESOTA STATE
HORTICULTURAL
SOCIETY



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An orchid blends beautifully in the purple-themed St. Paul garden of Patty Hren-Rowan.

Photo by Jennifer Simonson

MINNESOTA STATE
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CRAZY FOR COLOR!

PHOTO COURTESY OF TERRA NOVA NURSERIES

Heuchera 'Black Beauty'

IN the last two decades, standard-sized coral bells (*Heuchera*) have become one of the most popular groups of perennials for American gardeners, largely because of breeding efforts to expand the foliage color range of these easily grown perennials. At one point, I tracked all of the new introductions but that quickly got away from me as they were coming too fast and furious. While it may seem we have gone overboard with new introductions, that is how plant hybridizing and introduction schemes operate in today's marketplace.

The rising interest in colored foliage forms of coral bells got started with the seed-grown selection *Heuchera micrantha* 'Palace Purple', the 1991 Perennial Plant Association Perennial Plant of the Year.™ Twenty-two years later, 'Palace Purple' remains an inexpensive popular variety,

even though more recent introductions offer improved qualities. Once breeders achieved superior dark-foliaged forms, interest rose in expanding the range of foliage colors, patterns, sizes and textures. More recently, breeders began creating plants with excellent foliage colors and attractive blooms, something that most early introductions lacked.

Not all of the early coral bell introductions proved reliably winter hardy here. Some of the early breeding lines were heavily centered on coral bells native to the western United States. Though wonderful plants, they lacked the vigor and hardiness necessary in our northern climate. This, coupled with some nursery production issues, resulted in frustration for gardeners. The good news is that breeding lines have evolved and the production issues have been resolved. Some of our most popular and dependable varieties today are those that have *Heuchera*

There's a heckuva lot of *Heuchera* on the market. Plantsman Mike Heger helps us sort through the best options for northern gardens.

By Mike Heger

villosa, a tough and dependable species from the southeastern United States, in their bloodlines.

Modern coral bells are not cheap. Almost all commercial production of these perennials is done via tissue culture, an expensive process that quickly brings significant numbers of plants to the marketplace. However, the longevity of these perennials in the landscape, if properly sited, quickly offsets the slightly higher initial cost.

It Started with Purple

Since purple foliage coral bells are where it all started, let's take a look at some of the best varieties in this color range. 'Frosted Violet' (USPP 15085), from the breeding program of Charles and Martha Oliver, is one of my favorites in this group. The leaves are a stunning burgundy-violet color, accented by darker veins. The foliage color is especially



PHOTO COURTESY OF THIERRY DELABROYE



PHOTO COURTESY OF TERRA NOVA NURSERIES

'Circus'

'Obsidian'

pronounced on new leaves and reappears as cool fall weather arrives. This cultivar exhibits excellent vigor and blooms with light pink flowers. Terra Nova Nurseries' 'Obsidian' (USPP 14836) is also among the best of the dark-leaved forms available today. Its rounded leaves are very deep purple-black with a distinct sheen on both surfaces. The foliage color holds well throughout the entire growing season. Terra Nova's 'Black Beauty' (USPP 13288) is noteworthy for its blackish red leaves that are pleasingly ruffled, glossy and held somewhat upright in the

clump. 'Blackout' (USPP 20613) is another dark purple variety worthy of consideration. This European introduction offers a compact mound of glossy, deep purple-black leaves and a decent show of creamy white flowers.

The native American *Heuchera villosa* has been incorporated into a number of breeding programs, including those of Thierry Delabroye, a prominent French plant breeder. The leaves of his introduction 'Mocha' (PP18386) are among the largest of any of the coral bells. New leaves are rich bronze-purple with royal purple undersides. The color changes as the season progresses. Light conditions greatly determine the shade of the mature foliage. Higher light conditions will result in leaves that are near black, while more shade leads to a chocolate brown color. 'Crimson Curls' (USPP 13729) is another standout with its highly curled leaves that are bronzy purple on the top and maroon underneath. Its colors are most intense early in the season but they hold up well throughout the summer. 'Binoche' (USPPAF) and 'Dark Secret' (USPP 20683) are two more fine



PHOTO COURTESY OF TERRA NOVA NURSERIES

'Georgia Peach'

introductions in this color range that are becoming more generally available.

Some purple foliage types have silvery tones to their leaves. 'Plum Pudding', for example, never ceases to amaze with its neat, tidy habit and excellent performance in the landscape. This charming perennial offers shiny, plum-purple leaves with silver veins. Another classic in this group is the vigorous and hardy 'Silver Scrolls' (USPP 12066). Its bur-

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Once breeders achieved superior dark-foliaged forms, interest rose in expanding the range of foliage colors, patterns, sizes and textures.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF SHADY OAKS NURSERY

'Citronelle'

gundy foliage is flushed with silver in spring. The silver dominates as the season progresses and the veins turn deep burgundy-red. 'Amethyst Myst', an introduction from Terra Nova Nurseries, forms an attractive compact mound of foliage. The leaf color is an unusual amethyst overlaid with silver tones. Delabroye's breeding efforts have resulted in several fine *Heuchera villosa* types in this color range: 'Beaujolais' (USPP 19557) features large, dark burgundy leaves with darker veins and a silvery overlay; 'Encore' (USPP 19578) has smaller rose-purple leaves that exhibit silver highlights upon maturity; 'Pinot Noir' (USPP 20434), also with smaller, more refined foliage, offers dark purplish gray foliage topped off with silver; and the recently released 'Magnum' (USPPAF), with its very large dark purple leaves overlaid with silver, also looks to be a significant player. One of the most exciting new purple coral bells is Charles Oliver's 'Stainless Steel' (USPP 23349). The leaves emerge purple with a silver flush but, once mature, the tops are clear silver while the undersides remain dark red-purple. There is nothing similar to it among modern coral bells.

From Caramel to Orange

Another popular color group within these perennials are those with orange tones. Among the most widely distributed is Delabroye's *Heuchera villosa* hybrid, 'Caramel' (USPP 16560). The leaves are butterscotch when they emerge but the top color changes to peachy orange as the foliage matures. The undersides are purplish red and contrast delightfully with the upper surfaces. 'Christa' (USPP 20764) is another of Delabroye's *Heuchera villosa* types and one that may be undervalued and under-

sold. The foliage emerges rosy purple with underlying peach tones. As the leaves mature, they turn peachy orange with a silvery sheen. Its show of pink flowers is pleasing in combination with the foliage color.

Or, consider one of the tricolor coral bells. Don Jacob's *Heuchera americana* 'Eco Magnifolia' is an older standard and Terra Nova's 'Green Spice' is a staple in this color range. The broad, green leaves are overlaid with silver and their veins are red. The end result is a plant with excellent color contrast that is especially



'Caramel'

PHOTO COURTESY OF WAITERS GARDENS

CORAL BELL CARE

Habit: Coral bells form attractive mounds of evergreen basal foliage. Snowless winters or exposed sites sometimes result in leaf damage but new foliage tends to quickly mask that. They all bloom with dainty flowers in late spring and early summer but many types with colored foliage have rather insignificant displays of flowers.

Light: Colors will develop and hold best in light shade.

Soil: These perennials thrive in rich, well-drained soil high in organic matter. As established plants, they are drought tolerant.

Pests and Diseases: Rarely a problem, though poorly drained sites can lead to crown and root rot.

Special Needs: The crowns of older specimens become woody and tend to push upward with age, often resulting in crown damage during the winter. When this happens, the plants should be lifted, divided (discarding the oldest central crown) and replanted in soil that has been amended with organic matter. Early spring is the best time for dividing.

—M.H.



PHOTO COURTESY OF WAIVERS GARDENS

'Amethyst Myst'

remarkable early in the growing season. In fall, the foliage takes on shades of red and orange. A more recent similar-colored, seed-grown (less expensive) type that looks to be a significant player is Syngenta Flowers' *Heuchera americana* Marvelous Marble.™ European plant breeder Dirk Scheys has recently introduced 'Birkin' (USPPAF), which may prove to be another fine addition to this color class.

In the chartreuse to yellow color range, the palette of varieties is limited and leaf coloration is highly dependent on light conditions. Delabroye's 'Pistache' (USPP 19585) is a favorite, with foliage that will be chartreuse-yellow in higher light intensities or lime green in more shade. As fall arrives, the edges of its large leaves often turn red. 'Citronelle' (USPP 17934), a sport of 'Caramel', is a smaller-leaved, earlier introduction whose color will vary from citron-yellow to chartreuse, depending on light conditions.

Chameleon Coral Bells

Also exciting are coral bells with changing leaf-coloration patterns throughout the growing season. The standout here is Terra Nova's *Heuchera villosa* hybrid 'Georgia Peach' (USPP 19375). The leaves are bright peachy orange in spring, rose with purplish red veins in summer and rose-purple in fall, all the time accentuated by a silver overlay. Another popular variety is Delabroye's 'Tiramisu' (USPP 20429). Its foliage emerges golden yellow with red veins and matures to chartreuse with a silvery overlay. 'Miracle' (USPP 20274) is a sister of 'Tiramisu', offering a more pronounced burgundy-red central pattern in spring and chartreuse-yellow edges. It turns light green in summer with a pleasant display of pink flowers. As fall arrives, some burgundy-red tones return to the foliage. 'Pinot Gris' (USPP 19592), a Delabroye selection, has foliage that emerges with orange hues and has silver tones near the leaf margins. The color transitions to smoky rose overlaid with silver—hard to

“ Those described here are among the best of the standard-sized, colored foliage coral bells for northern gardens. ”



'Tiramisu'

PHOTO COURTESY OF JESSE ANDERSON

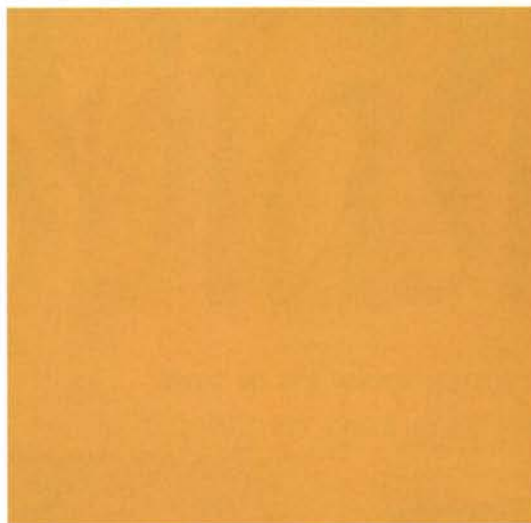
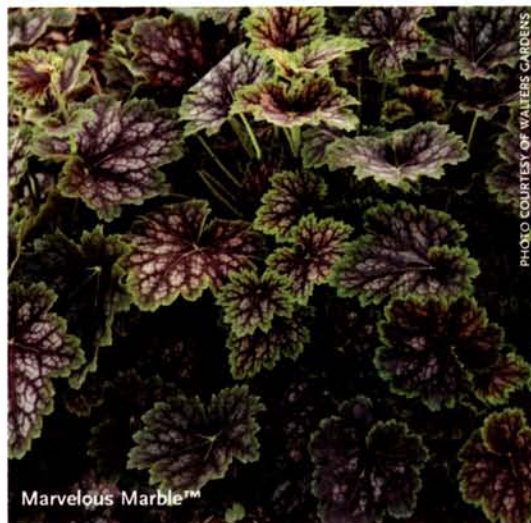


PHOTO COURTESY OF JESSE ANDERSON

describe but distinctive in the garden. Be on the lookout for 'Circus' (USPPAF) whose foliage is peach with red veins in spring turning chartreuse with red veins and overlaid with silver in the summer months. This one also offers a nice display of bright rose-red flowers in summer.

Several green-and-white, variegated foliage coral bells are also worth growing. Bluebird Nursery's 'Snow Angel', the pioneer of the group, created quite a stir in the gardening world when first introduced. It has now been surpassed by better growing varieties, such as 'Hercules' and 'Paris' (USPP 18881). The former offers green foliage heavily speckled with white and a showy display of deep scarlet red flowers. The variegation pattern is stable but it does mute as summer heat arrives. 'Paris' is perhaps the heaviest and longest blooming of the colored foliage coral bells. The variegation pattern is more of a silvery white overlay, rather than a speckling pattern. Its blooms are deep rose pink.

Far from a comprehensive treatise on



Marvelous Marble™

PHOTO COURTESY OF WALTERS GARDENS

'Stainless Steel'

what this fine group of perennials has to offer, we think that those described here are among the best of the standard-sized, colored foliage coral bells for northern gardeners. The palette of foliage colors, patterns, sizes and textures, along with improved flowering qualities, will no doubt continue to expand so there are certainly more choice additions coming for our gardens. [19]

Mike Heger owns Ambergate Gardens in Victoria, Minn.

