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A Three-season Beauty

Pulmonaria deserves a spot in Rogue Valley gardens

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By Althea Godfrey

Poor pulmonaria. Despite being a spring beauty with three-season interest, it's still an under-used perennial in the Rogue Valley.

Perhaps its common name, lungwort, has an unappealing ring. It's time to get over that.

With silvery leaves and early, long-lasting blooms, it deserves to be a valley favorite. Add to those qualities drought-tolerance, deer-, disease- and slug-resistance and you have a plant that should be in every garden.

This plant is anything but unsightly, with attractive leaves that run from nearly full silver to deep green with silver spots. In March, or thereabouts, it provides a long-lasting flower display in a wide range of blues and pinks. Some varieties have lance-shaped leaves, while others are more oval. While not commonly carried in wide variety in local nurseries, the determined gardener can find the perfect specimen online.

If pulmonaria has a weakness, it might be a "down time" after flowering, and a tendency in older varieties to get powdery mildew. The summer decline is not as drastic as with poppies, but the foliage looks kind of tired after flowering. A new variety, Silver Bouquet, has been bred for no down time, says Chuck Pavlich, director of new product development at Terra Nova Nurseries in Canby.

Its flowers emerge from nice stems, face up and range from violet and sky blue to rose, salmon and coral pink. Blooming is followed immediately by new foliage.

"A rainbow of colors, a sweet plant and no lag time. It's great for gardeners," Pavlich says.

All pulmonaria are very tolerant of soil type and sun exposure, says Pavlich. The new varieties he's testing get full sun and still look great under 100-plus-degree conditions. Powdery mildew is another problem the nursery has bred to eliminate, he says. He credits the French variety, *Pulmonaria cevennensis*, a drought-tolerant and disease-resistant species used extensively in Terra Nova's breeding program.

"I like to think of it in a woodland garden," says Drew Matthews, nursery salesperson at the south Medford Grange Co-op. "It goes with other plants in that setting. I like to plant them with ferns and purple-streaked heucheras, so they highlight the other plants around them."

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will depend on your location, but pulmonaria are among the first to appear and bloom in spring. Flower size depends on the variety, but even when small, quantity will provide great color. The blooms have a crepe paper-like quality, says Matthews.

Don't use it in your garden if you have a high-boron content in your water, according to Matthews. Instead, plant it in a container, where it will also perform well, and water with a boron-free source, such as collected rainwater.

Nurseries may carry only a few varieties, but online sources should have more. Terra Nova does not sell to individuals, but has a garden center locator on its Web page: www.terranovanurseries.com/r/, says Pavlich.

Shade-loving Trevi Fountain, with profuse, blue flowers and lance-shaped, green leaves spotted with silver, is a standard and should be available locally. Pavlich likes Bubble Gum for a pink-blooming variety. Another specimen that likes shade, it has a clumping habit and more silver than Trevi Fountain.

For areas with more sun, try Moonshine, which has near-white blooms and very silver leaves. Silver Bouquet can also tolerate more sun, though afternoon shade is probably in the best interest of both plants.

Even in tight budgetary times, a new garden plant returns on its investment. Like most perennials, pulmonaria will take a few years in the garden before it gives a spectacular performance. Consider it something else to look forward to.

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