

Seeking to make the world more beautiful

National Garden Bureau highlights heucheras, geraniums

The National Garden Bureau's goal is to make the world more beautiful with plants by inspiring gardeners and giving them useful information. This year, it has named 2012 The Year of the Geranium and the Year of the Heuchera. Both of these flower families are large and varied, but none have difficult requirements for growing success.

The geranium the NGB is celebrating this year can more accurately be called pelargonium. When Linnaeus of Sweden first published his plant classification system in 1753, he lumped cranesbills and the pelargoniums in one family he named geranium. It did not take long before the French botanist L'Heritier decided one group was distinctly different and moved them to their own group he called pelargoniums. This caused a controversy that endures to this day. But, today I will talk about the plant that Thomas Jefferson first sent from Paris in 1786 to John Bartram in Philadelphia and that most of us still call geraniums.

As bedding plants, geraniums can be grown in the ground but most of us use them in containers. There are four main types. Zonal geraniums, *Pelargonium x hortorum*, with its familiar leaf markings, is the flower that is sold everywhere in the spring. No matter what color, from white to shades of lavender, salmon, pink

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and red, there is a geranium that will appeal. Most flower heads will have single or double flowerets, but some will have starry flowerets. There are dwarf 10-inch plants and miniature 6-inch plants, as well as the familiar 12- to 18-inch size; something for everyone.

A second type is the regal geranium, *Pelargonium domesticum*, which is sometimes sold as a Martha Washington geranium. These are bushy plants that need cool temperatures to set buds and bloom in the spring. A smaller variety is called the angel geranium with blossoms that can resemble pansies.

Then there are the scented leaf geraniums, again a *Pelargonium domesticum*. These do produce small blossoms but their main appeal lies in their leaves, which release a rich fragrance when they are brushed or crushed. You can choose chocolate, lemon, rose, peppermint or any one of a dozen other fragrances.

Finally, there are the ivy-leaved geraniums, *Pelargonium peltatum*, with vining stems and, naturally,



Terra Nova Nurseries photo

Lime Rickey

ivy-shaped foliage. These are especially desirable for hanging baskets and window boxes or for adding their graceful charm to any container. The flowers have smaller, looser umbels in shades of pink, white and red.

All geraniums need full sun and a rich, well-drained soil. When grown in a container, drainage is vital as is fertilizing every two weeks with a half-strength balanced fertilizer.

While geraniums can be used in your container garden, heucheras, or coral bells can bring a whole range of foliage color to flower beds. They can be used as specimen plants, as groundcovers and can even add vigor and color to your container plantings. Some catalogs will list them in the shade section, but they also happy in the sun.

It seems to me that the last few years have brought us an explosion

are only interested in heuchera foliage, I do want to point out the brilliant Firefly, which has tall red flowers and even fragrance.

Whether or not we choose a coral bell with pretty flowers, the foliage itself is useful in flower arrangements and a long-stemmed leaf will last a long time in water.

Terra Nova Nursery is a wholesale nursery that has hybridized and introduced many stunning heucheras that you will find in local garden centers and mail-order nurseries like Bluestone Perennials. Many of these new varieties are very hardy; they form large clumps quickly and can be used in a variety of ways in the garden.

Heucheras thrive in sun and shade. They prefer a soil that is near neutral or only slightly acid, but are quite adaptable. Good drainage is important. After a year like 2011 that brought us such torrential rains, we are reminded of how important drainage is in the garden, especially for plants like coral bells.

On the other hand, they are drought tolerant — in case we have a very dry year. Mother Nature seems to be getting more and more capricious. We can't even count on a rainy season or dry season on a predictable schedule.

Geraniums and heucheras are both dependable, varied and beautiful plant families. It is easy to see why the National Garden Bureau is celebrating them this year.

Readers can leave comments at Pat Leuchtman's Web site: www.commonweeder.com. Leuchtman has been writing and gardening in Heath at End of the Road Farm since 1980.

of heuchera varieties. I don't know many gardeners who grow coral bells for the dainty flowers on their tall slender stalks anymore. Heucheras are all about the large leaves of wonderful foliage in a range of colors from the bright chartreuse green of Lime Rickey to the yellow and pink of Ginger Ale and rich dark Plum Pudding. There are also the ruffled green leaves of Garden Merit Award winner Sashay edged with burgundy, the hot pink splashes on Midnight Rose and the silver shimmer on the dark leaves of Frosted Violet.

While we don't think that perennials change much over the growing season, beyond going in and out of bloom, a heuchera like Green Spice will surprise us with its green and silver leaves and red veins in summer, but then turn orange and burgundy with silver in the fall.

Having said many gardeners