

# Perennial Trends For 2012:

## What's Hot and What's Not

WHAT ARE THE LATEST TRENDS FOR GROWERS WHEN IT COMES TO PRODUCING PERENNIALS?

By Susan Martin

To get a pulse on what's hot for 2012, we talked to major U.S. growers from coast to coast and north to Ontario, Canada. Interestingly, they shared similar insights into what's selling this year. A few themes emerged across all regions: the need to deal with the rampant deer population, drought issues and the idea that color is still king.

### Oh Deer!

Recent research conducted by *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine revealed the top ten most searched-for perennials from Google to their website. Growers might guess that the list included genera that are hot in the trade like echinacea and heuchera. Not so. Instead the list included ten deer resistant classic perennials such as dicentra, dianthus and lavender, with perovskia topping the list. Four of the ten perennials on the list were also drought tolerant and two were natives.

According to Cornell University, the U.S. deer population has risen to more than 20 million with some areas experiencing deer population densities as high as 30 to 40 animals per square mile. Those numbers are rising as habitats change, the number of hunters decreases and hunting restrictions

are enacted, winters are becoming more mild, and farm crops are becoming increasingly more nutritious food sources.

Overabundant deer populations have become increasingly difficult to manage and there have been large scale losses estimated up to \$1 billion in agricultural crops, timber, landscaping and gardens.

As a result, consumers are asking for more deer-resistant plants from their retailers, especially in the Midwest and East Coast where deer populations are especially high.

### Durable Plants Needed Please

As expected, drought tolerant perennials are in high demand in the southwest market according to Siena Randall of EuroAmerican Propagators in California.

Drought-tolerant plants are continually requested by consumers and growers in the Southwest where water supply shortages extend beyond times of drought and water rates continue to rise. The same holds true in the Great Plains states and the southeast United States.

Drought-tolerant succulents may have been a trend in the past, but they are now considered mainstream in the hottest, driest parts of the United States. Growers and hybridizers are working on hardier



*Perovskia tops the list of deer-resistant perennials sought after by consumers.*





agaves, agapanthus, cactus and other plants that can take the heat but can also take the cold in parts of the country that experience extreme heat in summer and snow in winter. Consumers also continue to seek out interesting succulents.

Consumers are looking for plants that are more durable in their increasingly extreme climates says Mary Vaananen of Jelitto Perennial Seeds in Kentucky. Well-adapted native plants are also a growing trend among consumers and contractors who are focused on restoration work in her area.

A small segment of gardeners is also concerned about the current honeybee population crisis and they are planting more native perennials to support the bees' habitats. Shelley Elgar of Sheridan Nurseries in Ontario, Canada, reports some interest in native

*Durable, drought-tolerant succulents continue to be in high demand.*

perennials at her retail stores where POP is used to advertise their Ontario Natives and Native Roots plant lines. However, if the natives don't present well in containers at retail, shoppers look to showier plants for sale. Debbie Hewlett of the wholesale nursery Skagit Gardens in Washington does not see a big demand for natives from their customers.

### Color Sells, Period

Every grower and retailer knows that color sells. That's nothing new. But increasingly savvy customers are looking for more than just pretty flowers — they want color, color, color, all season using fabulous foliage and long lasting flowers.

While fun foliage may have been considered a fad in the past, it's now standard fare. This works for growers and retailers too because when you combine colorful and attractive foliage with flowers, the plants' sales window dramatically increase — a win-win for all involved.

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## Consumers are looking for plants that are more durable in their increasingly extreme climates

Perennials like ‘Summerific Summer Storm’ hibiscus which offers deep purple foliage and dinner plate sized pink flowers fit the bill perfectly because the plant sells well even before it comes into bloom at retail. Sales of this perennial are strong for Walters Gardens according to marketing director Susan Martin.

First-year blooming Gold Collection hellebores and the everblooming geranium ‘Rozanne’ are very popular at Skagit Gardens per Hewlett. Ornamental grasses that look great all season in northern climates have been popular in Ontario, Canada per Elgar.

### Keep Up or Lose Out

Growers across the United States report that retailers who are keeping up with the new varieties and updating their product mix from year to year continue to be the most profitable.

Those who don’t put the effort into seeking out and trying new varieties are losing customers to more progressive retailers. Consumers are looking for what’s new — they already bought what was in stores last year. They are disappointed when they cannot find the new varieties they are seeing advertised online, in print and at regional events.

Brands such as Proven Winners, Endless Summer and Wave petunias that are marketing their products directly to consumers are being requested by name at

*Sheridan Nurseries offers a line of “Ontario Natives” to meet its consumers’ desires for native perennials.*

retail, with brand recognition increasing each year. While plant branding may have been considered a fad when it first began, it is now mainstream like nearly all other consumer product categories.

### Dealing with the Next Generation of Gardeners

Younger consumers want plants that have big impact right away. The idea that color sells is even more evident with younger, less experienced consumers who are looking to decorate their balconies and landscapes with colorful plants. Fragrant flowers and cool foliage are popular with this crowd and experienced gardeners alike.

The popular vintage trend seen in the clothing industry also is crossing over into horticulture as demonstrated by the resurgence of new cultivars of “old fashioned” plants such as hollyhocks, tall garden phlox, irises and daylilies.

Fairy gardens are incredibly hot this year, especially among mothers looking to engage their young children in gardening for the first time. Who needs a dollhouse when you can create an entire enchanted



*Hibiscus ‘Summerific Summer Storm’ offers loads of color with its dark foliage and fabulous flowers. Color sells!*



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*Fairy gardens are hot this year, especially among mothers looking to engage small children in gardening.*

**Younger consumers want plants that have big impact right away.**



village using miniature plants, furniture and figurines? Sales of miniature hostas and evergreens are strong this year as well as anything fairy-related to go along with them. Elgar also reports strong sales of their “Little Diggers Garden” children’s gardening plant line, sales of which support the Children’s Wish Foundation.

While trends may cycle through quickly in other industries, the current trends in the green industry are likely to stick around awhile. Our trends are based on long standing issues like climate change and wildlife control. One of our biggest challenges now is learning to understand the next generation of new gardeners. Adapting to this shift in our core customer base will be the true test of many in our industry. ☐

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