

Climbing Out of a Rut

Feeling adventurous? This year, break out of your routine and experiment with new plant introductions and new spins on old favorites. From herbs to ornamental grasses, the opportunities to surprise and entice are endless. Read on for a little inspiration on exciting crops, evaluated at the University of Florida trial garden.

By Jessica Boldt, Jennifer Boldt,
Jim Barrett and Rosanna Freyre

Each year, while planning for the upcoming spring season, we tell ourselves that this is the year we are going to try some new plants. But somehow, we always seem to fall back into a rut. Gardening is about creativity and enjoying the uniqueness of each plant, and customers soon grow tired of the same thing year after year. Many great new plants and significant improvements of old favorites are now available on the market, providing us with new crops to try, new uses for old favorites, and new combinations for mixed containers.

As you count down the days until spring arrives, take the time to see how you can incorporate some of these crops into your production or retail program and help create interest and excitement for your consumers.

Basil

Herbs have always been an excellent addition to small gardens and mixed containers thanks to their texture, color and fragrance. 'Pesto Perpetuo' is one of the newest introductions to the market and was one of the plants visitors asked about most at the trial garden this past season. This basil is columnar in growth habit, reaching a height of 3 to 4 feet, and the leaves are an attractive variegation of green and cream. 'Pesto Perpetuo' is a fast grower and did not flower, making it great for culinary use. This basil will make a great component plant to provide height in mixed containers or as an accent plant to any



Top: *Chrysocephalum* 'Flambe Orange', *cuphea* 'Totally Tempted' and *euphorbia* 'Diamond Frost' by Proven Winners. (Photo: Jessica Boldt) **Bottom, left to right:** Basil 'Pesto Perpetuo'; *Begonia* 'Bonfire'. (Photos: Jennifer Boldt)



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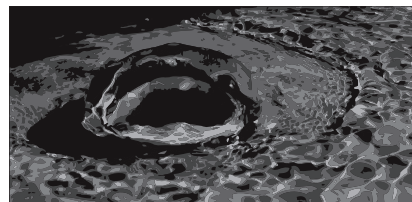
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garden. It can be grown in part to full sun (even in Florida) and requires minimal maintenance, but take care to keep the foliage dry at night, as it can develop some leaf-disease issues.

Begonia

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to hit the market in recent years, 'Bonfire' is easily recognizable by its hanging, bell-shaped, bright-orange flowers. The leaves are green with red margins and have the typical "angel-wing" appearance. It has an excellent self-branching habit and creates a mounding to semi-trailing shape, ideal for hanging baskets or monoculture pot production. This begonia originates from New Zealand and was entered in our trial garden the past two seasons by Selecta First Class. It is extremely tolerant of hot, dry conditions and performed very well in our trial until the rainy season arrived and brought with it foliar diseases.

Chrysocephalum

Chrysocephalum is a great new plant introduction because of its incredible garden performance and versatility across a wide range of environmental conditions. The Flambe series is from Proven Winners and the past two years 'Flambe Orange' was awarded "Best of Trials" for our summer season. Chrysocephalum has a mounding to spreading plant habit, silvery-green foliage and yellow-orange flowers on a continual inflorescence. This plant makes an excellent landscape plant, especially as a low-growing border, because of its minimal maintenance requirements and ability to survive temperatures from the high 20s to the mid-90s (especially in drier climates). The silvery-green foliage is a great contrast to many other foliage and flower colors and will work well in mixed containers. In production, this plant is slower-growing and takes more time to create a full appearance, but be patient and wait for the plant to perform. It is well worth the wait!



Top to bottom: Chrysocephalum 'Flambe Orange'; Cuphea 'Rico Red'. (Photos: Jennifer Boldt)

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Cuphea

Cuphea has been around for many years, but the recent trend in breeding has been toward large and showy flowers available in reds, pinks and purples. Some of the new cuphea we have evaluated are the Loco series and 'Rico Red' from Syngenta Flowers, and the Flamenco series and 'Totally Tempted' from Proven Winners. Cuphea makes an excellent warm-weather, full-sun landscape plant that reaches about 2 feet high and up to two feet wide. 'Totally Tempted' has a more compact growth habit. These plants are continuous bloomers that do not require any dead-heading and only minimal pruning for shaping, but they are susceptible to cuphea beetle damage and require some monitoring during the summer months.

Cuphea is best used in mass or border plantings to take advantage of the plant habit and provide maximum visual appeal in the landscape. These plants have long internodes during production and are fast growers, which make them better-suited for large container production, including 1-gallon pots, hanging baskets and monoculture tubs.

Dahlia

We do not typically think of dahlias as an excellent landscape plant in the deep South

because of the heat and humidity. The Mystic series, however, exceeded our expectations this past year in the trial garden and was awarded "Best of Trials" for our spring season. Bred in New Zealand, these dahlias have dark, almost-black foliage in striking contrast to the bright flower colors available: yellow (Illusion), orange (Spirit), scarlet (Desire) and pink (Dreamer).

Plants in this series are fast growers and will reach a garden height of 2 to 3 feet. They are prolific bloomers under moderate temperatures, and flowering will decrease as temperatures reach the high 80s and 90s. We were pleasantly surprised to discover that these dahlias did not develop any significant disease problems when exposed to regular rainfall and high humidity. The foliage color makes these plants an excellent addition to any garden as well as a component of mixed containers, but they should be planted in larger arrangements because of their final size. Plants will easily fit into 4-inch and gallon production programs and are available from Proven Winners.

Euphorbia

Euphorbias are best known for their use at Christmas, but many new euphorbias are coming to the market with exciting possibilities for growers, landscapers and gardeners. Three



Top: Dahlia 'Mystic Dreamer'; Bottom: Euphorbia 'Tiny Tim'. (Photos: Jennifer Boldt)

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Top: Geranium 'Caliente Coral'. (Photo: Jennifer Boldt) Bottom: Ornamental grasses by Kieft Seeds. (Photo: Jessica Boldt)

euphorbias from Proven Winners were trialed in our garden last year, and all were excellent performers. These plants provide a wide range of height, texture and color options, especially for small gardens and mixed containers.

'Burgundy Wine' reaches a height of 4 to 5 feet, has dark-red foliage and makes an excellent focal point in any landscape. 'Diamond Frost' has numerous small, showy, white bracts and reaches a final height of 18 to 24 inches. This plant is best used as an accent or border plant in the landscape or as a component of mixed containers. Consumers love the delicate look of the plant and are pleasantly surprised at its garden toughness. 'Faded Jeans' is a compact euphorbia with gray-green foliage and works best as an accent plant or in rock gardens. Euphorbias from other companies are available as well and should be considered for addition to a production or retail program thanks to their foliage coloration and flower longevity.

Geranium

Geraniums are one of the staple plants in any garden but typically do not perform well as temperature and humidity increase. The Caliente series of geraniums from Syngenta Flowers has been in our trials the past two seasons and has performed excellently in both our spring and summer seasons, even under the toughest conditions. Plants in this series are interspecific hybrids combining the smaller flowers typical of ivy geraniums and the compact, mounding plant habit typical of zonal geraniums. There are five colors available in the series — Coral, Deep Red, Fire, Lavender and Rose — but Coral is by far the best summer performer. These geraniums are prolific bloomers and will provide a continuous

show of color, even throughout the summer. For the best visual appeal, these geraniums should be used as borders or massed plantings in the garden or as monoculture baskets or tubs.

Ornamental Grasses

Ornamental grasses are not new to the market, but are greatly underused. With the rapid increase in popularity of mixed containers, grasses are an excellent source of color and texture to any combination and provide long-lasting visual appeal due to minimal maintenance requirements. Grasses are available in a wide range of colors, from blue-gray and green to red and bronze. They will work with just about any color palette or seasonal arrangement to create a "wow" factor. PanAmerican Seed has seven grasses as part of "The Grasses of Fantastic Foliage" marketing program. Kieft Seeds has used the slogan, "Our goal: color grass in every pot," and had an excellent display of grasses used in mixed containers at the California Pack Trials last year. With an increase in the number of cultivars available from seed, grasses are cost-effective and easy to incorporate into any production or retail program. **GPN**

Jessica Boldt is a graduate research assistant, Jennifer Boldt is trial coordinator, Jim Barrett is professor of floriculture and Rosanna Freyre is a research scientist at the University of Florida, Gainesville, Fla. Jessica can be reached at jlboldt@ufl.edu.

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