

BY VAUGHN FLETCHER

Sunset at the Kansas State University Flower Trial

Canna 'Toucan Rose'

These 13 stunners exhibited visual impact and durability into late summer.



Vaughn Fletcher is president of Fletcher Consulting. He has been in the horticulture industry since 1971, working in many areas including landscaping, garden center and greenhouse production, greenhouse and nursery sales and sales management. He can be reached at vfletcher9@gmail.com.

The Kansas State University trials were established 23 years ago in multiple trial sites throughout Kansas to demonstrate the adaptability of annuals and perennials to the challenges of the prairie climate. The performance criteria included vigor, durability, foliage integrity, floriferousness, visual impact, and heat and humidity tolerance.

Annuals were evaluated in late summer, and based on performance, were trialed again the following year. If the plants performed consistently the second season, they became part of what was called the Prairie Star program established by Kansas State University to recognize the top performers. This list is a collection of genetics from many breeders. It is not a commercial or branding program but recognizes the top performers in over two years of trials.

I have attended this trial and field day since its inception, and the information gleaned for the breeders and industry has been invaluable.

Unable to survive the Kansas budget woes, the sun has set on this program state wide except the All-America Selections vegetable trial. I visited the most extensive trial in Olathe, Kansas, for the last time on Oct. 1 last year to evaluate the top performers. Many of the chosen few are, or would have been, in the Prairie Star program for 2019.

All of these varieties were available to the industry in 2018 and were in many spring programs. These plants stood the test of time from May through early October in the field trial. I will describe the top performers briefly. Some of these varieties were highlighted in earlier articles. The trial consisted of varieties from 15 breeders comprising over 500 annuals, including vegetables and 200 shade and sun containers.

I chose two container plants based on performance, and the balance were in the field trials.

CANNA 'TOUCAN ROSE'

Proven Winners

This is an exciting time in the canna world with outstanding seed and vegetative varieties available for multiple applications including mass plantings, landscape beds and thrillers in containers. The Kansas trial included many colors of Toucan

and Cannova. All varieties were flowering profusely, but 'Toucan Rose' was the most impressive due to its vibrant flowers, clean foliage, minimal seed development and excellent flower presentation above the foliage. I cannot stress enough the importance and impact of cannas in the North American landscape. In every trial from south to north the canna entries were dramatic and stunning flag bearers of color.

CATHARANTHUS 'SOIREE KAWAII CORAL'

Suntory Flowers

We had catharanthus standouts in both categories, Soiree Lavender in the container trial and Soiree Coral in the field trial. The Soirees have excellent application in landscape beds and containers. The series provides a colorful canopy all summer, heat and drought tolerance, disease resistance, continual flowering, and outstanding cold tolerance into mid fall. Three new colors will be introduced for 2019.

CATHARANTHUS 'SOIREE KAWAII LAVENDER'

Suntory Flowers

This micro flowering series — comprised of Coral, Lavender and Pink — was a top performer in multiple trials last summer and did not disappoint in this trial. Lavender was one of the only container plants that manifested durability and continued to produce dark lustrous foliage and strong color retention with a prodigious flower canopy on a tight mounded habit. The series is drought tolerant and demonstrated disease resistance throughout the summer and fall.

COLEUS 'FLAMETHROWER SALSA VERDE'

Ball FloraPlant

The Flamethrower series was impressive last summer, and the new color for 2018, Salsa Verde, was a stand out. This Flamethrower maintained a compact habit with bright chartreuse non fading serrated foliage. There was very little flower development this late in the season. This variety is outstanding for sun or shade as a filler or thriller. Based on performance last summer, the entire series is low maintenance, high impact, and a summer survivor series. We have myriad choices of seed and vegetative varieties, and this unique colored series has demonstrated its potential as a multipurpose coleus.

CUPHEA 'FLORIGLORY SOFIA'

Westhoff

The FloriGlory series has seven introductions for 2018, including the All-America Selections winner Diana. Many of the varieties were in summer trials last year and demonstrated durability, floriferousness, heat tolerance and vigor. 'FloriGlory Sofia' in the container trial provided a colorful canopy into October with excellent branching and outstanding heat and drought tolerance. Some colors offered greater color impact in beds and containers, which necessitates critical evaluation for selection in spring programs. This series is being used as fillers in container programs and border plants in landscape beds.

EVOLVULUS 'BLUE MY MIND'

Proven Winners

I wrote about this plant in an earlier article highlighting the summer performers at the Dallas Arboretum. This may be the only annual that manifests pure sky blue flowers from late spring plantings until frost. Its attributes include heat and drought tolerance, compact growth habit, clean silver-green foliage, and, most importantly, a floriferous compact canopy of saturated flowers unrivaled in the industry. This has been a top performer and summer survivor in trials for many years and has proven itself in the market in multiple applications.

GOMPHRENA AUDREY

American Takii

One of my favorite genera is gomphrena. There are many excellent series available encompassing assorted colors and sizes. The attributes that unite them include heat and drought tolerance, low maintenance, exceptional flower power and summer performance. The Audrey series is a tall bedding series maturing at 30 to 40 inches, providing strong stems, large flowers and excellent branching. Purple Red was one of the most vibrant colors in the gomphrena color palette.

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Catharanthus 'Soiree Kawaii Coral'



Catharanthus 'Soiree Kawaii Lavender'



Coleus 'Flamethrower Salsa Verde'



Cuphea 'FloriGlory Sofia'



Evolvulus 'Blue My Mind'



Gomphrena 'Audrey Purple Red'



Hypoestes 'Hippo Rose'



Lantana 'Havana Sunrise'



Ornamental pepper 'Midnight Fire'




Salvia 'Mysty'



Salvia 'Saucy Red'



Zinnia 'Zany Rose Picotee'



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HYPOESTES 'HIPPO ROSE'

Proven Winners

This vegetative hypoestes is unlike the standard polka dot plant for many reasons. This variety was in multiple trials last year and manifested a bushy growth habit with strong color retention and vigor. Red and Rose have bright colorful venation, adaptability in sun or shade, and nonflowering late into the fall. Rose was impressive in the Kansas trial for these very reasons. This plant does not have a spiller habit but is upright and vigorous with large leaves. The color is dynamic in the landscape or as an accent or thriller component in large containers. It is recommended for sun or shade and, in this trial, was in full sun for four months and demonstrated stunning foliage until the end of the season.

LANTANA 'HAVANA SUNRISE'

Dümmen Orange

This series, introduced in 2016, consists of eight colors including three introductions for 2018. They have been trialed throughout the country and have excelled in performance ratings. The attributes of this series include uniformity, low seed set, moderate growth habit and large umbels. Sunrise was one of the top performers in this late season trial. It is floriferous with excellent branching and the umbels had transitioned to a polychromatic lemon yellow with dark lavender, creating a distinctive and vibrant canopy. This series has demonstrated versatility in containers and beds. As with many lantanas, this is a summer performer worthy of your consideration. Four new colors will be introduced for 2019.

ORNAMENTAL PEPPER 'MIDNIGHT FIRE'

PanAmerican Seed

We have had many exceptional ornamental pepper introductions in the last few years. 'Midnight Fire' is new for 2018, and it did not disappoint in this trial as well as in earlier trials. The distinctive dark black foliage and purple fruit transitioning to red was eye catching in the trial. This variety was well branched, with nonfading foliage and, as the season progressed, became more stunning and colorful. It has significant potential in

autumn programs in planters and containers as well border plantings in landscape beds.

SALVIA 'MYSTY'

Ball FloraPlant

We have many excellent season extender salvia varieties to choose from, and this new 2018 introduction augments that list. 'Mysty' has a more compact habit than the very popular 'Mystic Spires'. It has dark green foliage, true blue flowers and matures at 12 to 18 inches. This variety will make an excellent mixed container component. 'Mysty' was one of the most colorful salvia in early October and trials throughout the country earlier in the summer. It is also a hummingbird, bee and butterfly magnet.

SALVIA 'SAUCY RED'

Cultivaris

I extolled the virtues of this series last summer in an article following my southern plant tour. The red, purple and coral were stunning in early June in Alabama, eastern trials in late August and this Kansas trial in early October. This sterile, self cleaning, stunning vegetative series manifested an incomparable prodigious flower canopy maturing at 2 to 3 feet. It thrives in full sun but it is adaptable in partial shade. It is part of the Southern Living Plant Collection, and the nectar-rich blooms attract hummingbirds and butterflies. Applications include landscape beds and as a thriller in large containers. The series provides high impact color and many coccinea, splendens and farinacea in the marketplace pale in comparison to the performance of the Saucy series. All three colors were impressive but 'Saucy Red' was the most floriferous in multiple trials south to north.

ZINNIA 'ZANY ROSE PICOTEE'

Garden Genetics

This vegetative, interspecific zinnia was spectacular in the trial. The flowers transitioned from deep purple early in the season to pale pink and white in the fall. This free-flowering robust variety

bloomed continuously from June to frost and demonstrated that last fall. It was exceptionally mildew free, matured at 24 to 30 inches, and the floriferous canopy created by the bright, bicolor flowers was eye popping. It was used in the Raker container trial with the same

results. This zinnia will be ideal in landscape beds or large containers. This was the Royal Horticulture Society People's Choice award winner for 2017 and a top performer in multiple U.S. trials.

The plant choices are innumerable; many varieties are trialed and

selected for specific application in spring programs. These varieties stood the test of time and demonstrated the ability to survive and thrive, both in the Kansas University trial and throughout the country. [gpn](#)



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