

GROWERTALKS

Culture Notes

8/1/2008

Heuchera in Combinations

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Landscape plantings will begin to look worse for wear in September, when faded, sunny-colored annuals will be out of place at an earth-tone time of the year. Autumn-themed combination containers are one way a consumer—and grower—can quickly and easily extend the growing season into the fall and early-winter months. Heucheras, with an extensive color palette, may be one of the most appropriate plants to use.

Al's Garden Center, a grower-retailer in Woodburn, Sherwood and Gresham, Oregon, is known for its heuchera combination containers. They produce more than 300 containers for the Always in Bloom program and other sales at their two retail locations. Al's uses heucheras in combination with both annuals and perennials, and they look for combinations that will hold up through a few frosts, if not the whole Northwest winter.

"We look at combining plants with heucheras that will give us a show from the end of August to September," says Judy Alleruzzo, perennial buyer for Al's Garden Center. Cool-tolerant pansies are good items for the containers; however, they stay away from mums. "If we do use a mum, it's going to be a splashy one and there'll be some other plant that will take over," she says. "We'll use anything that will stay at least through Thanksgiving and beyond."

Judy says the heuchera color palette makes them an integral component of autumn combination containers, and she mentions varieties such as Marmalade, Peach Flambé and any of the purple varieties as great fall colors. They combine heucheras with other perennials that add structure, texture, and color with their foliage. For instance, Al's uses phormium, which is hardy in the Northwest, for structure, as well as carex, blue fescue, juncus, and curly willow branches. They also use evergreen culinary herbs such as purple and golden sage to add color and fragrance. Al's has begun using hellebore varieties with attractive foliage in their heuchera combination. Varieties such as Silver Lace and Ivory Prince add a lovely silver-green element to the combination. As a bonus, the hellebores send up blooms beginning in January.

Cultural Considerations

Because these are fall combination containers that are used at a relatively low-light time of year, Al's doesn't

worry about combining sun and shade plants. They also don't worry about water requirements, since they receive ample moisture in the Northwest. Their major considerations are putting together a mix of plants with aesthetically pleasing textures and colors.

Back in June, Al's began rooting unrooted cuttings of plants that will go into heuchera combinations. The heuchera combinations are potted up into color bowls, customer containers and three sizes of the Always in Bloom inserts. They use 4-in. liners to make potting up the heuchera combinations easier, but they also use gallon containers.

Al's production staff pots up the heuchera combinations beginning August 1. They top-dress with a 7-4-3 fertilizer and place them into a Cravo retractable-roof greenhouse without shade. The heuchera combinations aren't heavy feeders, but they will add a liquid fertilizer if needed. August's warm and sunny conditions help finish off the containers in about two weeks, for mid to late-August sales. For September sales, Al's pots up the combinations in the third to fourth week of August and allows them three to four weeks to finish.

There's also costs to consider in the mix, Judy says. "We have to watch that we're making them cost effective," she says, "so we're not putting in too many plants and growing on too long and losing money."

Some of heuchera combinations at Al's Garden Center include:

- Heuchera with sedum Angelina and festuca Elijah Blue.
- Heuchera with festuca Elijah Blue and lysimachia Aurea (golden creeping Jenny).
- Juncus Quartz Creek, carex Amazon Mist, *Carex testacea* (orange sedge), euphorbia Red Wing, heuchera Plum Pudding, vinca Variegata and viola.
- Cut branches of curly willow, phormium Jack Spratt, hellebore Silver Lace, heuchera Obsidian, *Sedum cauticola* (stonecrop), ornamental cabbage, ajuga Black Scallop, woolly thyme, violas or pansies.