The ancient Egyptians used the color black to portray scenes of the afterlife and the River Nile, which covered the land with pitchlike silt after each flood. In movies about the Old West, the bad guy always wore black—now the good guys wear it to show their mysterious sides. And it’s always the black cat that makes an appearance every Halloween. A Tabby or Calico just wouldn’t have the same spooky effect.

What’s the fascination with this peculiar color? Karen Platt, a British writer and gardening professional recognized as the world’s leading expert on dark-colored plants, says it’s because they’re “sexy and intriguing.”

“The color black is indeed very rare in the plant world and most black plants are simply dark,” she says. “True black would be rather difficult to place in the garden in any quantity, but they are immensely beautiful and therefore very appealing.”

In 2000, Karen published her first book, “Black Magic and Purple Passion,” and it became so popular, it’s now in its third edition. She founded the International Black Plant Society because people’s attraction with dark flowers and plants continues to be a hot trend in the gardening world.

Perhaps another wave of black flower fanaticism could begin with the introduction of Black Velvet, a new vegetative petunia variety from Ball FloraPlant that the company is promoting as “the world’s only black petunia.” Along with two other dark, star-patterned varieties—Phantom and Pinstripe—Ball FloraPlant is anticipating a lot of enthusiasm for these breeding breakthroughs.

It took four years for Ball flower breeder Jianping Ren to develop the three varieties that she says was no easy task. But all of her hard work will be worth it if they’re the hot topic in next year’s gardening magazines and blogs.

“The black color did not exist in petunias before, so it has to come from the right recombination of a novel color mutant and multiple regular color genetic backgrounds. It is difficult and very different from breeding true blue flowers because at least there are some blue flowers you can start with,” she says. “It’s unique and
unusual, and opens the door for more new colors.”

“Unusual” is a great word to describe black flowers, but many people have pre-conceived notions about this color. Many people link them to the occult, death or a creative way to let someone know how you really feel about them. Sure, you can send a bouquet of black roses or carnations to your ex-girlfriend or nasty neighbor, but Karen says that’s not really the popular choice for these ebony ornamentals.

“I have never actually come across anyone giving black plants to anyone they dislike,” she says. “I always associate funerals with white flowers and I did once meet a very innovative lady in the U.S. that makes black wedding bouquets. It’s true that black plants get a bad rap—some people do associate them with evil—but they are far too lovely to have such connotations attached to them.”

Plus, dark flowers and foliage make great accents in combinations and gardens, allowing their surrounding companions to really stand out. Karen says she uses chartreuse, golden or silver-colored plants to complement her favorite black-toned varieties.

Still wary of growing these black beauties in your greenhouse? Are you skeptical of their sell-through abilities? Don’t be. Like any other color, there are thousands of dark-colored plants that can be sold for more than just the fall season, so you don’t have to assume they should be pigeonholed for “a one-night Halloween stand,” explains Karen.

“There’s a basic fear of what someone perceives will sell,” she says. “Since I started researching black plants 20 years ago, I have always noted that they are the quickest sellers. My books are testimony to that, too. I have watched the increase in demand and played a part in that change.”

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Dark Delights

Here are a few flower and foliage varieties available in shades of black and deep purple. Of course, we can’t list them all, but these are the most common varieties we found.

- Actaea Black Negligee (Terra Nova Nurseries)
- Ajuga Black Scallop (EuroAmerican Propagators)
- Colocasia Black Magic (Agri-Starts)
- Colocasia Midnight (Agri-Starts)
- Cordyline Dark Star (Twyford)
- Cryptanthus Black Mystic (Agri-Starts)
- Helleborus Onyx Odyssey (Marietta O’Byrne, Breeder; Offered by Walters Gardens)
- Ophiopogon Black Mondo Grass (Emerald Coast Growers)
- Pansy Halloween II (PanAmerican Seed)
- Petunia Black Velvet (Ball FloraPlant)
- Sambucus Black Lace (Proven Winners)
- Viola Sorbet Black Delight (PanAmerican Seed)