GROWERTALKS

Features

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Stuff We Love

Chris Beytes, Ellen C. Wells, Jennifer Zurko & Jennifer Polanz

Jen Zurko, Editor

I don't know about you guys, but this year wasn't a great tomato year for me. If it wasn't for the Unicorn Red cherry tomatoes from Burpee, it would have been a total bust. Unicorn Red is an indeterminate tomato, which it actually seems to take to another level. I had loads and loads of tomatoes the entire season—even going into late September. They were small enough to just throw into salads or into a pasta dish. And there were so many, I ended up giving bags of them away to family and neighbors. The photo is just from one early harvest and it was like that almost every day.

When we saw it at California Spring Trials, they told us they were crack-resistance and that proved to be very true—look how lovely the fruit is! And with a delicious sweet flavor, too.

Last year at Costa Farms' final trials event, Delilah Onofrey from Suntory showed me three of their Soiree Catharanthus planted together as a mixed container. At the time, Delilah was trying it out just to see how they grew together and to gauge people's reactions, which she said were positive. So when Suntory graciously sent me three Soirees, I decided to copy Delilah's idea and I was also pleased with the outcome. I've always just put Soiree Catharanthus in smaller pots because they're so cute and compact. But they work together in a mix, too.

Chris Beytes, Editor-in-Chief

I didn't have a chance to grow any new varieties this year (at least not annuals or perennials), as the season here in Orlando is counter to the new variety sample box timing. Breeders send out stuff in May, when conditions just about reach frying-pan hot down here. Instead, I'm planting cabbage palms, traveler's palms and bird-of-paradise.

But looking through all my travel photos, I found something I love: displays at one of my favorite IGCs, Blumen Gardens in Sycamore, Illinois. Their designers are crazy-creative, always coming up with new ways to use ordinary items. Like these fence post cut-offs:

I've seen old windows before, but they're usually hung flat on the wall. Instead, try some angles and some twinkly lights.

I had to smile when I spotted a wall display made from sawn-in-half end tables painted black and screwed to the wall.

Ellen Wells, Senior Editor

I've been a fan of buddleja, aka butterfly bush, since my mother first planted one in her border several decades ago. I like this shrub because it comes alive with motion in the second half of summer as pollinators—butterflies included—find its nectar-filled flowers. I've never had one of my own because it's a fairly big shrub and I just don't have the room for it.

Dümmen Orange's Little Rockstars Buddleja took care of that problem for me. It's a compact variety that's completely appropriate for patio containers. I planted three of them in a 3-gal. pot and they grew no more than 1.5-ft. tall. It's a small plant, but it was filled with perfectly cone-shaped and deliciously smelling blooms. Bonus: My backyard's wildlife don't seem to care about it. Zones 5 to 9.

Breeders who send me samples—you should know I put your plants to the test immediately by waiting weeks to plant them. I even forget to take them out of the box sometimes until I walk by it the 20th time and finally think, “Oh, yeah, I gotta plant this.”

Suntory Flowers’ samples waited an extra-long time to be potted up this year, as the box was forgotten in a dark corner. Some plants were even crispy when I finally got around to them. I am happy to say Sun Parasol Original XP Double Pink Blush went from near death to the most prolific flowering annual on my deck this year. And because I also managed to misplace the tag, its double flower was an extra special surprise. Its scampering vines are growing through a nearby dahlia and it’s fun to see where its double blooms will emerge.

I can rig up barriers for groundhogs or rabbits, but the earwigs destroying my peppers, basil and mint require the help of some sort of control product. Suzanne “Buglady” Wainwright-Evans suggested a granular spinosad would do the trick and I found Ant Adios from a company called Sunday Custom Plant Care. It’s an OMRI-listed insect and ant killer that’s effective against a bunch of different pests, earwigs included. About three or four days after applying Ant Adios around the plants I had fresh apical growth, which remained unmunched for the rest of the season!

Jennifer Polanz, Managing Editor

A lot of my plant stories begin with how I basically killed it. Most of them stop there. But this gorgeous Canna Cannova Gold Leopard (left) from American Takii survived my worst decisions and not only returned from the grave, but bloomed into October. It’s a tough cookie and beautiful to boot, making it a showstopper in large mixed containers. It’s so cool, it’s one of those plants your customers will think is AI, but it’s not.

We don’t always write about foliage fillers, but I really loved this one from my Westhoff sample box. Alternanthera Fancifillers Choco Chili (right) was a great performer for three seasons and was still going strong in October. It has multiple dimensions, with a darker leaf and a red backside (the photos don’t really do it justice), as well as some green at first shoot. It’s a nice, moody component plant to add depth.

The samples for perennials and shrubs are a slow burn—they take at least a year before we can write about them. I received this Queen Bee Chastetree, above, a First Editions shrub, from Bailey Nurseries last year, and it's already grown enough that I wanted to give it a mention. It's a tough one, with everything I like: deer resistance, drought, heat and cold tolerance, and it's a pollinator magnet. Hardy down to Zone 6, it's a great option that ticks a lot of boxes.