

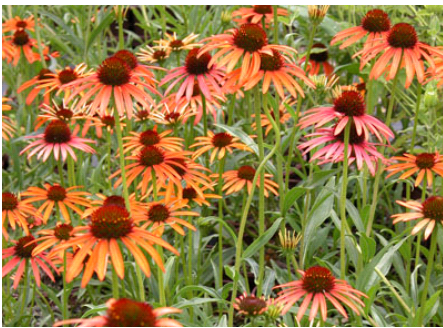
GROWERTALKS

Guest Column

4/1/2023

The Echinacea Renaissance

Lowell Halvorson



Modern echinacea cultivars feel different today than the popular varieties released even a decade ago: more flowers, bigger blooms, lusher crowns, longer lifespans and so forth. These aren't the echinaceas you remember, but the ones shipping now—the popular ones that move to the top of the sales charts and stay there.

Pictured: Orange Meadowbrite: The “Elvis of Echinaceas” that changed attitudes and possibilities.

These changes didn't happen by accident, but as a reaction to a series of key events in the echinacea timeline. The Renaissance affects what you grow and why, and it still pushes new forms and new production techniques forward, even in 2023.

“The Echinacea Renaissance” built on earlier efforts. The first wave occurred when the trade cleaned up the native prairie plant for commercial production. Adaptation always occurs first, taking something nice like *E. purpurea* and making it nicer. Think Magnus (the tall one) or White Swan (the white one) or Kim's Knee High (the short one).

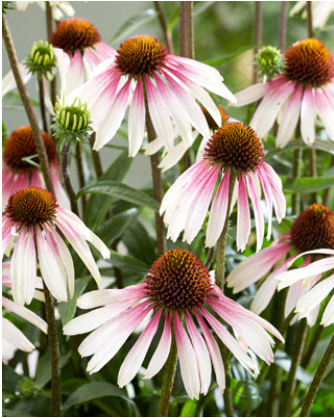
The rock 'n roll era

Like it did with Elvis, the world changed with the release of Orange Meadowbrite by Jim Ault at Chicagoland Grows. It wasn't pink. “You can do that?” was the response among breeders. The echinacea flower became the riffs and licks from the Saul Brothers' Big Sky series or a stream of hits like Tomato Soup and Mac 'n Cheese out of Terra Nova. A market-bending explosion of colors marked the era.

Meanwhile, Europeans took the American native in their own direction, due in part to the significant support of their floral industry. Darwin pulled Razzmatazz, generally regarded as the first pompom double, from the Netherlands. Improvements like Pink Double Delight and Hot Papaya followed. Even today, the floral influence on echinaceas from Europe is still strong. Look at the bedhead Funky series or the bald cones of the Drumstick series for florists who pluck off the petals (yes, they do that over there).

The blowback

Back in America, the sales of single-color echinaceas started to stall. Wait, what? Echinaceas can be uncool? Apparently, yes. Garden centers, liner producers and breeders all started to hear complaints about short lifespans, winter kill, color fading, short bloom windows and a litany of demerits that turned gardeners toward other choices.



Pictured: Pretty Parasols: Part of the new wave with a beautiful bicolor and an arrowhead top.

You could see the problem in the rapid churn of the sales charts. A variety would storm to number one, only to plateau and sag a few years later. Another flashy one would take off then fizzle quickly. At the time, we thought echinacea was a fad-driven category. In hindsight, sales showed us underlying problems, but we didn't pick up on this until the whole category sagged.

The Renaissance age

Our modern echinacea grew out of this crisis. Breeders pulled back and reassessed their strategies, especially within the dominant innovators. Features that define a good echinacea today—such as heavy flower count, extended bloom window, long lifespan and slow-to-fade flowers—come from their “whole plant” approach toward selection and improvement. Rather than walking through a field of samples and picking out cool flower tops, breeders judged plants by their ability to survive winter, create multiple growing points and pass through TC production successfully.

Take a look at a modern series like Kismet or Sombrero, and lift up the flowers. The difference you see is controlled by large sets of criteria at the breeding houses: winter survivability, multiple growing points, first-year flowering, beefy crowns, well-formed roots and sturdy stems. One benefit already visible? Popular varieties stay popular longer. This stability wasn't the case in the past, and it is a blessing for planners and buyers for the future.

Seed pushes forward

Seed gives echinacea the ability to reach into décor and landscape markets where plants are presented without cultivar names. TC struggles here, but seed competes because cost expectations and crop performance are set by the annuals.

PanAmerican Seed/Kieft Seed dominated the market for about a decade with Cheyenne Spirit and the Pow Wow series, noted as consistent, vibrant and affordable. Once Cheyenne Spirit flourished in autumn decor, seed suppliers responded. Two years ago PanAmerican added three Artisan solid colors, and last year Benary moved their PollyNation series of five solids from a limited trial to full availability.

The promise of URC

Then there's Panama Red, a short echinacea from Danziger shipped as cuttings. Conventional wisdom says you can't do this, but they finished trial production at Monrovia and James Greenhouses, and moved to the general market this year. URCs hold the promise of TC-like consistency, shipped at a price closer to seed. Danziger knows a thing or two about URCs, so they've ramped up their stock availability to meet this year's anticipated demand.

The new wave

Going forward, I don't see evidence of innovation slowing. Take a look at the pallida-style versions. Best typified by Pretty Parasols and the Mama series, the ring petals drape downward, giving the blooms a distinctive arrowhead look. This is where you'll find the most successful bicolors as well.



A newer trend is the dahlia-like styling of the double ring petals, found in certain Sunseekers colors like Sweet Fuchsia, Golden Sun or Rainbow. Each has a standard cone surrounded by double or triple rings of outside petals.

Pictured: Sensation Pink: Most often mentioned by the experts.

The cognoscenti's pick

Ask pros to name the best cultivar and one name keeps popping up:

Sensation Pink. You might expect a flashier variety, but a single pink is the jazz standard of the business and Sensation Pink plays it well.

Mt. Cuba summed it up when Sensation Pink ran a perfect score in their highly regarded multi-year echinacea trial.

“An absolutely striking cultivar with a luminous neon-pink bloom, it is a little bit better in every way,” reported the trial director. “Beautiful dark stems, nice upright plant, no disease issues, didn’t flop over, ticked all the checkboxes.”

This is full circle Renaissance breeding, taking all that modern goodness back home to where it all started—a simple prairie flower. **GT**

Lowell Halvorson is a consultant and writer in Fairfield, Connecticut, for retail and wholesale horticulture, specializing in business development. He also covers the breeding community for GrowerTalks magazine. You can contact him at (203) 257-9345 or halvorson@triadicon.com.