

## Hot Plant Picks

My life is starting to return to normal after a couple months serious involvement with aliens. Well, maybe I shouldn't call them aliens, but newbies and immigrants. What I'm talking about are the plants that were on display at the Hot Plant Picks exhibit at the SF Flower & Garden Show last month. The exhibit is intended to showcase new hybrids of familiar plants, worthwhile plants that have been brought to California from other parts of the world, and plants that had been forgotten, but are once more available and worth returning to the public view. It is a true collaboration: sponsored by the SF Show producers, organized by volunteers from Western Horticultural Society, supplied with plants by many generous nurseries on the West Coast, and viewed with excitement by many plant lovers throughout the Bay Area. If you want numbers, 46 volunteers gathered and babysat 145 plants from 24 nurseries for over 30,000 plant lovers who visited the show. The HPP exhibit (under various names) has been a regular feature of the garden show since its inception, 25 years ago, and for many of us plant nerds, it steals the show every year. There is truly something new for everyone there. Let me share a peek at just a few of the exciting plants that were on display.

*Ceanothus* (California lilac) is a well-known favorite in native plant circles. It comes in many forms, from prostrate groundcovers and small shrubs to large shrubs, 20' tall. We've all seen the lovely blue flowers along Highway 280 in the spring, well, there were four different species of *Ceanothus* to be seen at the show.

Edibles were represented by the Australian finger lime (*Microcitrus australasica* var. *sanguinea*) a cute little finger shaped fruit, that when opened is often described as citrus caviar. You could have also seen *Murraya koenigii*, a curry leaf plant, sought after for use in Indian cooking. Or how about earth chestnut (*Bunium bulbocastanum*)? Or an edible lily bulb (*Lilium brownii*)?

An evergreen groundcover caught my eye, *Mukdenia rossi* 'Karasuba' has large shiny maple-like leaves that start out green in spring, get red streaks by summer, and in fall the leaves turn a dramatic red/green combination. Right next to the Mukdenia were *Ozothamnus selago* and *O. coraliodes*, so different in appearance that it really brought to mind the amazing variations in nature. *Ozothamnus* leaves are silver-green and scale-like to the point of looking like coral. It was, perhaps, the most alien in appearance.

If your interests lie in covering large areas of bare dirt without using a lot of water, chemicals or mowing, there were two types of grass to examine. UC Verde Buffalo Grass and Bella Bluegrass are two new types of watersaving grasses that have a lot going for them.

If you were looking for new varieties of blooming perennials, you'd have seen *Penstemon* 'Red Riding Hood', *Aquilegia* 'Little Lanterns' (columbine), several gorgeous *Hellebores* and purple-leafed *Heucheras* (coral bells), and some sages that were obviously named by an old hippie: *Salvia* 'Flower Child' and *S.* 'Telegraph Avenue'.

One part of the exhibit was a real tease, since the plants on loan from Martin Grantham, greenhouse manager at SF State University, are not commercially available. Grantham has traveled to South Africa at least a dozen times plant exploring, and has become a real pioneer in the propagation of many unusual South African plants. His gems at the show included *Nivenia*, *Ceratostemma*, and *Utricularia*. The South African woody irids and restios that Grantham has been successfully propagating are groups of plants that have caught the attention of plant nerds and garden designers alike because of the drama and interest they can create in a garden.

Another interesting group of plants on display came from Australia as part of the Koala Blooms Introduction Program. This program was created in the late 1990's between the UC Santa Cruz Arboretum, a nursery in Australia, and several nurseries in California in order to bring in worthy Australian natives. The program benefits the UCSC Arboretum and their world class collection of Australian plants through a system of royalties. The plant names might be unfamiliar: *Adenanthos*, *Boronia*, *Chorizema*, *Thomasia*; but the plants themselves fit comfortably into our landscapes and (to the most part) our climate. I've been fond of *Thomasia solanacea* 'Velvet Star' since my first glimpse just a few years ago. The leaves are thick, fuzzy, and shaped like oak leaves. The flowers are small, papery and white, but the dark red-purple veins give them a pink hue. It has loads of flowers in the spring, and then blooms sporadically the rest of the year. As with many of the Australians, the cold tolerance of *Thomasia* has not been completely established.

You can see a list and photos of the HPP exhibit at [www.westernhort.org](http://www.westernhort.org).

~Nancy Schramm  
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