

## New Plants and Landscape Practices

David W. Marshall directs environmental education programs for the University of Florida IFAS Extension in Leon County  
<http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu>

March 2004 Spring Special

**C**hange is inevitable in life. And even though we often like to escape to the solace of gardening because the world around us is changing a little too fast, there are lots of changes in the gardening world also. There's always a new plant to try. And, if you follow the research coming out of the universities, you will find that even things like recommended planting procedures change over the years.

Too often we get stuck in a rut, growing the same old plants year after year. It's fun trying something new. Here are a few plant suggestions that will be new for many of you, though the more adventuresome of you may have already tried some of these:

***Plectranthus* 'Mona Lavender'**: Later in March, after the danger of freeze has passed, this is a flowering annual you should try if you haven't already. Hybridized in South Africa, this *plectranthus* is a colorful new plant for container gardens to display at entrances, on patios, or on balconies or porches. You can also use it as a bedding plant for annual or perennial gardens to provide attractive foliage and flowers. Spikes of lavender blossoms open throughout the growing season. The plant will grow to about two feet tall and wide. The leaves are deep green with purplish veins, slightly curled at the edges with short coarse teeth. You can grow P. 'Mona Lavender' in sun to partial shade. Flowering will be reduced in shade. I've found that flowering increases in the fall, but the plant is still attractive all season long. It prefers a moist soil. In-ground plantings grow best with twice-a-week waterings. Container plantings often need daily waterings during hot, dry weather.

Fertilize in-ground plantings every six to eight weeks with a general garden plant food. Fertilize container plantings with a houseplant product or use a slow-release fertilizer at the label rate. Encourage a compact growth habit by periodically trimming the tips of new shoots. Keep plants in bounds by pruning shoots hanging over walkways and infringing on nearby plantings.

**Perennial peanuts**: Perennial peanuts aren't really new. They've been around some years now, but as a forage crop for livestock. Within the last ten years, they've begun to catch on as a landscape plant, but the trend has been slow. Unless you've actually seen a planting of this groundcover, you probably can't imagine how you could use it in your landscape. But, for example, it makes a great plant to stabilize an eroding bank in a sunny area. The drawback is that the foliage turns completely brown in the winter. But the stems are still there to stabilize the soil. And, new growth will emerge in the spring and completely cover the old brown stems. You may even consider converting a section of sunny lawn that you're tired of mowing to this groundcover. Or, you can interplant it in a low-maintenance lawn area and mow it high to still enjoy the flowers. The numerous cheerful yellow flowers, produced through the growing season, are quite attractive. No fertilization

will be required.

***Cordyline australis***: I've seen cordyline plants around for years, always considering these dracaena-like plants to be strictly a house plant or warm-season patio plant. However, at a professional nurseryman's meeting last fall, one of the Georgia growers showed a couple of types of cordyline that they were growing in their nursery. He also mentioned that the plants had made it through the winter fine. I particularly liked the color of one of the cultivars as it was somewhat of a bronzy red or burgundy. So, I brought one home and put it in a pot. It has been outside all winter and is doing fine.

Here's what Plant Delights Nursery has to say about these cordylines on their website: "Cordylines have been a great surprise to those who enjoy growing hardy tropicals. Although they never reach the size that is attainable in frost-free climates, cordylines have proven quite reliable from the warmer parts of Zone 8 south (warmer Zone 7 with protection). (*Tallahassee is in the warmer part of Zone 8.*) C. 'Red Sensation' is a dramatic purple-red form that shows off best in bright sun. The narrow 1/2" x 18" long red leaves radiate around the dracaena-like stalks...fabulous as a specimen plant in the garden or in a color bowl."

**Sun-loving coleus**: Coleus is definitely not new. And though I'm seeing lots more of the sun-loving coleus being used in commercial landscapes, I still find many home gardeners stuck in the mindset of thinking of coleus just as a plant for shaded areas. 'Hurricane Louise' is one cultivar that was named one of the 2004 Plants of the Year by the Florida Nurserymen and Growers Association. But there are many other excellent cultivars of sun-loving coleus. Just visit your local nursery this spring and try some of the excellent choices for full sun.

**Magilla perilla**: I think most of us have to try this plant just because the name is so catchy. Magilla perilla looks somewhat like a coleus, but it's not. The bold vibrant leaves of green and burgundy with a bright center splash of hot pink will brighten up any landscape. The colors develop best in full sun or bright, filtered light. We grew this plant in our demonstration garden last year and found it to be very well-mannered. It grew to be a nice compact plant of about 2-2 1/2 feet tall. Space the plants about a foot and a half apart.

### **New Planting Techniques**

In addition to staying up on new plants, gardeners should also keep up with new techniques. Lots of university research over the last ten years or so have even revised basic planting techniques for trees and shrubs. It is no longer recommended that you make the planting hole deeper and then refill it. Instead, make the planting hole wide, several times the width of the root ball is best, but make it a little less shallow than the height of the root ball. When you plant a small shrub or tree, it is actually recommended that you leave the top inch or so of the root ball above the level of the surrounding soil. With a larger tree or shrub, especially on a compacted or poorly drained site, you can leave even more of the root ball protruding. These new recommendations are because research has shown that planting too deep can severely inhibit the growth of plants due to lack of sufficient oxygen reaching the roots. Of course, when you plant this way, it will be important that you water the root ball of the new plant every day or so for the first few months if the planting is done during the warm season of the year. Be sure that the water is placed directly over the root ball. Otherwise the surrounding soil will get wet but the root ball won't.

###

