

Breeders return to the roots of the PHS Flower - Philadelphia Inquirer, The (PA) - March 22, 2013 - page D01

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It was at the first Philadelphia **Flower Show** in 1829 that a sophisticated audience of gardeners first laid eyes on some spectacular, must-have plants.

There were rare and fragrant peonies from China, an exotic "coffee tree of Arabia," a double-white pomegranate, a strange new thing called a poinsettia, and a big-leaf magnolia with gonzo blooms measuring four feet around.

The 2013 **flower show** held earlier this month also debuted some plants, although they weren't nearly as bodacious as those first ones. Perhaps, in time, that will change. The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, the **show's** producer, wants to return to those heady days by persuading **breeders** to formally introduce their best stuff to the public every year at the **show**.

"I think the industry doesn't think our **flower show** has the ability to get the word out about plants. They don't have experience with us," says Sam Lemheney, the **show's** design director, who nonetheless persuaded three of the eight or nine **breeders** he approached this year.

In 2014, he's aiming for "a huge bump" in the number of participants.

"The industry is good at marketing themselves to buyers and sellers, but they're less experienced in getting word out to the public," Lemheney says. "We can open doors for them."

Several of this year's **flower show** selections came from Hort Couture, a feisty little brand in Beckley, W. Va., that markets "boutique" annuals, tropicals, succulents, herbs, vegetables, and ornamental grasses to independent garden centers.

They include: Blue Zebra, an arresting blue-and-white striped hardy primrose; Glamouflage Grape, a bright purple (annual) petunia with cream and green foliage; and new additions to the year-old Under the Sea coleus series, such as Lime Shrimp, an annual with scalloped chartreuse leaves edged in fuchsia and, if you're hallucinating, a shape vaguely resembling a swimming shrimp.

Hort Couture was founded in 2006 by Jim and Jennifer Monroe, trained horticulturists who own two small garden centers in **Virginia** and West **Virginia**. Jim's father had a landscape business and owned a garden center, which helped shape the couple's business plan.

"Home Depot and Lowe's will never have Blue Zebra, so help me God," Jim Monroe says. "We saw the struggles people were having competing with box store retailers, so we started Hort Couture to try to find new, clever flowers that would be exclusive to the independent garden center.

"We believe in helping these small businesses," he says.

Mostardi Nursery in Newtown Square, for one.

Stephen L. Mostardi, a third-generation plantsman, will be promoting Hort Couture's **flower show** novelties this spring, especially the new coleus varieties, which thrive in sun/part shade.

"They're really interesting plants with nice, unique foliage," he says.

The combination makes them a good substitute for the common, colorful - and beloved - impatiens, which over the last few years has been decimated in most Eastern states and elsewhere by downy mildew. This aggressive, funguslike disease causes impatiens to shrivel up and die in as little as three weeks.

Some garden centers and big-box stores still plan to sell it this year - with a warning that diehard consumers would be smarter to buy disease-resistant alternatives such as coleus, begonia, torenia, annual vinca, and two kinds of impatiens that are not affected by the mildew, New Guinea impatiens and SunPatiens.

"The major focus for this year is going to be what people decide to do without impatiens. That's all anybody's talking about," Mostardi says.

With good reason: Impatiens has been his and other nurseries' top-selling annual for decades.

Lloyd Traven, a grower for Hort Couture at his Peace Tree Farm in Kintnersville, Bucks County, is talking up Blue Zebra. "It's stunning," he says.

The plant, a spring bloomer, grows in sun/partial shade and will survive the winter here.

And Glamouflage Grape, while not the only variegated-leaf petunia, is unusual for its stability. Variegated foliage often reverts to all-green, Traven says, "but this is crisp and clean variegation, and it's creamy white, not muddy."

The plant will bloom in sun/part shade from spring till a hard frost.

Traven, who grew the first nine Under the Sea varieties in 2012, calls the new ones - Lime Shrimp, Gold Anemone, Electric Coral - "quantum improvements over old ones. They're much faster-growing, sturdier, less disease-prone, bigger, broader."

The whole series has a curious backstory: It's being bred by students at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada. Royalties go back to the school's greenhouses and horticulture program.

It's all part of an endless loop of **breeders** trying to produce the spectacular, must-have plants that have fascinated gardeners forever. You know, stuff like the double-white pomegranate and strange-sounding poinsettia of 1829 - and the striped primrose and crustaceanlike coleus of 2013.

Jim Monroe is counting on it.

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