A Greener View: All-America Selections program displays the finest plants

by Jeff_Rugg

Winter is officially arriving, but I am already looking ahead to what I want to plant in my vegetable garden and flower beds next spring. I prefer vegetables that will be easy to grow and good tasting. The flowers need to be free flowering and hardy in my garden.

In order to determine if a new plant is going to work well in my garden, I see if it has been tested and approved in the All-America Selections (AAS) testing program. They have about almost 50 test gardens from Alaska and Canada to California and Florida. It is especially nice to have a test garden in a similar climate as your own landscape. They also have over 175 display gardens all across the continent that are used to show how the plants will grow in your local area.

AAS trial gardens have tested around 50 varieties of plants every year since 1932, and they only accept previously unsold varieties. There is an AAS Gold Medal Award reserved for a breeding breakthrough. Gold Medal Awards have been rare, only given once or twice a decade. The other AAS Award recognizes a flower or vegetable for significant achievements, proven superior to all others on the market.

Each testing garden has at least one official AAS judge. The judge supervises the trial, but isn't paid for his or her efforts. Typically, the judge is a horticultural professional and the site is part of trial grounds for a seed company, university or other horticultural institution.

The judge evaluates entries looking for desirable qualities, such as novel flower forms, flower colors, flower show above foliage, fragrance, length of flowering season, and disease or pest resistance. Vegetables are judged looking for such traits as earliness to harvest, total yield, fruit taste, fruit quality, ease of harvest, plant habit, and disease and pest resistance. The judges evaluate AAS trials all season long, not just an end of season harvest. Then based on the superior qualities, the judge scores each entry. Only the entries with the highest nationwide average score are considered to be worthy of an AAS Award.

When you see the red, white and blue logo of All-America Selections on vegetable and flower seed packets, bedding plant tags or in catalogs, it is a promise of gardening success. AAS has taken the guesswork out of finding reliable new flower and vegetable varieties that will show improvements over other varieties.

In 2005 there were five winners, in 2006 there were 11 winners, in 2007 there were four winners, and for 2008 there are only three - two flowers and an eggplant.

Last summer I tried several African Daisy (Osteospermum) plants with a wide variety of flower colors. They did horrible. They were pretty when I bought them, but the flowers only lasted a few days and then the whole group flowered sporadically over the summer. This year I will have to try 'Asti White' from Goldsmith Seeds, which has white daisy flowers with blue centers that are around 2 inches in diameter. As with many flowers from South Africa, it is drought tolerant, likes full sun and can survive a light frost at the end of the season. It will develop well in pots larger than 6 inches in diameter and it grows about 1 1/2 feet wide and tall.

The new viola 'Skippy XL Plum Gold' from Kieft Seeds Holland is also tolerant of frost. This 6-inch tall plant has numerous golden-centered 1 1/2-inch flowers surrounded with shades of purple. In deep southern areas, this plant will be a winter annual, blooming from fall until spring. In the mid-South where the summers aren't too hot, it can be a perennial, and in the North it will bloom from early spring until the heat of the summer. It is perfectly sized for containers and window boxes.

If you have ever had good eggplant straight from the garden (sliced, battered and fried), you know one of the joys of gardening. If you ever had bitter eggplant, you wonder why people ever ate this vegetable in the first place. The new eggplant 'Hansel' has few seeds and none of the bitterness of regular eggplants. The fruit can be harvested from 3-inches to 10-inches long with no loss in flavor, creating a long harvest window. This new dwarf plant only grows about 3-feet high and a couple of feet wide. The fruit are dark purple and shaped like a cucumber. This high yielding variety was developed by the Seminis Vegetable Seed Company.

All of these plants should be available from seed at a wide variety of catalog and retail stores. If you can't find them locally, then head to www.all-americaselections.org for a list of local stores and Web sites that have them.

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