

A Splattering of Newish Plants

by Stephanie Cohen

THE CATALOGS START COMING, and as plant devotees, we get excited by the word “new”. You have to understand that this may not be a new plant, but it is the first time this company has carried this particular plant. Sometimes a plant winds up in a catalog, but they have trouble with production or the plant reverts, or some other defect. It disappears for a time and comes back as new. Other times a plant is patented, taken to Europe, and sold in the European market for one to three years. It finally comes to the United States as new, even though you may have seen publicity about the plant. I like to call these plants “newish”, because they have not gone directly to the gardener. So here we go with new, newish, and underused, which was the title for my talk at this year’s HPS March Into Spring. The opinions expressed are mine and, if you don’t agree, don’t get your knickers in a twist, because I am not easily persuaded to change my mind.

My Fair Maiden™ Maiden Grass

After seven years of research, a new miscanthus, *Miscanthus sinensis* ‘NCMS1’ My Fair Maiden™ Plant Patent #26,387, became readily available to the public. I can only compare it to a seedless watermelon, because it is not sterile, but a highly infertile triploid. In other words, it produces very little progeny and, when they germinate, they never grow to maturity. This grass is 6–9’ tall with a 3’ spread and hardy in Zones 5–9. It has a vase shape and beige showy plumes in the fall. Will you buy it or stick with panicums which fill the same niche? I don’t have a crystal ball, so we will have to wait and see.

Nepeta mussini ‘Angel Wings’

My second choice is *Nepeta mussini* ‘Angel Wings’, better known as variegated catmint. This wonderful newish plant is a sport of *Nepeta racemosa* ‘Blue Wonder’. The charm of this plant is that it is only 6–8” tall and 12” wide—for those of you looking to fill small spaces. It grows in full sun to light shade. It has bright blue flowers, but is special because the foliage emerges in spring with a significant bright white-edged foliage which, like a chameleon, changes to

a speckled effect as the plant matures. Like most nepetas, it grows in well-drained to dry soil.



photo courtesy of Intrinsite Nursery

'Angel Wings' catmint has showy variegated leaves. When your catmint needs pruning, leave some foliage for additional colors.



photo courtesy of Walters Garden

This 'Leading Lady Plum' bee balm is a magnet for pollinators. It has a bright, showy flower and clean leaves, very, very resistant to mildew.

Monarda ‘Leading Lady Plum’

Here comes another newish monarda from the Leading Lady Series called ‘Leading Lady Plum’. This bee bam flowers earlier than most monardas in early summer. This one is also different as one of the parents is *Monarda bradburiana*, a species from dry open woods. It never seems to get mildew and has been in my meadow over twelve years with no sign of fungus. It is a rather tall, ungainly, branched species with a nondescript pinkish-purple coloration. However, ‘Leading Lady Plum’ is short at 14”, densely branched, and very floriferous. After the first flush of bloom, a secondary bloom emerges above the initial bloom, taking the flower show almost to late summer. It has a blingy magenta-purple flower that bees and butterflies love and deer hate. In addition, it grows in full to part shade and exhibits good drought resistance.

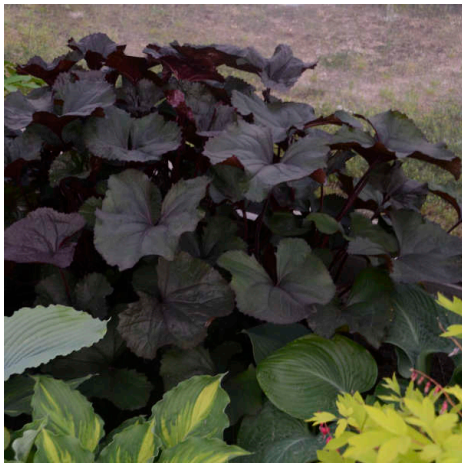


photo courtesy of Emerald Coast Nursery

'My Fair Maiden' miscanthus in full bloom in mid-autumn showing size and form.

Ligularia ‘King Kong’

Have a wet to moist spot? Try using *Ligularia* ‘King Kong’ known as big-leaf ligularia or ragwort. Think of ‘Britt-Marie Crawford’ on a double dose of steroids, as each leaf can be 16” across and new leaves have stunning



If you loved *Ligularia* 'Britt Marie Crawford', you will be going into ecstasy with the extra large, shiny, dark purple leaves of 'King Kong' that look black. They took their vitamins.

purple-black foliage that change to burgundy-purple as the summer progresses. Best in moist soil with morning sun. If in too much shade, it will turn green. You will be unleashing the beast that is 3–4' tall, Zones 4–9, and sports the same golden-orange daisy as most other ligularias.

need a little extra color. Deadhead to prevent a super abundance—unless you covet more. The 24" full sun onion grows in Zones 4–8, is very drought resistant, and deer and rabbits tend to leave it alone, but butterflies and bees really appreciate the blooms. If you hate it, just eat it!



A fully developed 'Empress Wu' is pictured—which takes time to achieve.

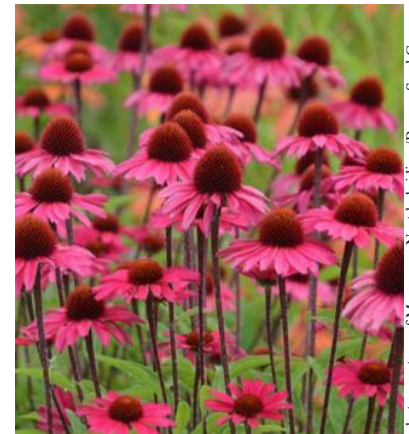
Hosta 'Empress Wu'

I have a bone to pick with misleading description tags. The next plants are newish, but you may have killed or discarded them by now because the plant did not match their tag. One is *Hosta* 'Empress Wu'. The main selling point is its gigantic size. Some gardeners discarded it after the second year because the size was of a slightly bigger medium hosta. What the tags neglected to include is that it takes three to five years for it to reach bragging size. So much for transparency.

Wild Swan Windflower

Another is *Anemone* Wild Swan = 'Macane001' (PBR), a beautiful white anemone with some of the undersides in a pale blue. I happened to actually read a report from the hybridizer who lives in Scotland, which has terrible winter weather. It can survive cold weather but to get good establishment, it must be planted in spring. Usually we don't get to see fall perennials until late summer or fall. I did plant in late fall because my daughter was getting married and I needed white flowers. I planted plugs. They looked fine for the wedding, but the survival rate was

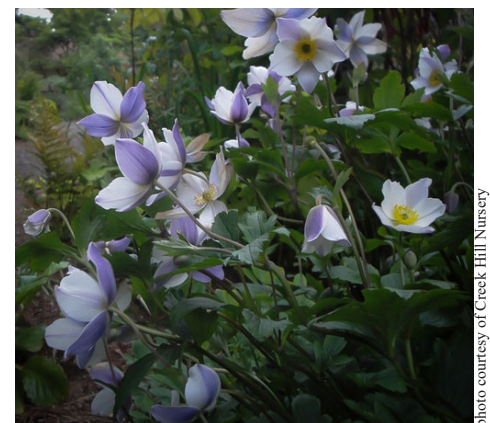
dreadful. After finding out this one fact, I am not surprised. Nurseries keep telling gardeners to read the tags carefully, but if the information isn't there, the gardener generally tells people it's a lousy plant.



The hot-colored flowers of 'Sensation Pink', which are large and flat, attract bees and provide a landing pad for butterflies.

Echinacea purpurea 'Sensation Pink' (PBR)

Well, I knew I should include an echinacea in my comments. I happen to like single echinaceas (my personal preference). This newish one is called 'Sensation Pink'. I think this name has been used before on other plants so that will certainly cause confusion. However, the hot magenta pink flowers are definitely discernable in the garden. It is 24" tall, hardy in Zones 4–9, sports dark stems with a compact habit, and blooms in summer. We are noticing that some of the newer hybrids of Marco van Noort of the Netherlands are quite attractive, but the jury is still out.



The flower petals are what makes this 'Wild Swan' a standout.



This very floriferous small 'Medusa' ornamental onion and its twisty leaves before flowering will definitely attract attention. Deer and rabbits leave them alone—need I say more!

Medusa Flowering Onion

Check out *Allium cepa* (Cepa Group) 'Medusa' (PBR), a newish ornamental onion. It has a gray-green, thin foliage. I love the way the exceptional, twisty foliage forms a low mound, and the nodding buds look like a head of snakes before they open to a chive-like light amethyst-purple flower. It flowers late summer to fall when most gardens



photo courtesy of Proven Winners

The bicolor flowers with purple leaves make 'Midnight Masquerade' a knockout. So does the easy care.

Penstemon 'Midnight Masquerade'

I love penstemons because they are basically a no-problem plant. Most of us have flipped out over all the purple-leaved cultivars because the foliage stays purple. This larger *Penstemon* 'Midnight Masquerade' has bigger foliage and even more purple. However, it has my vote for flower color. This new penstemon is hardy to Zone 6 and is 36" tall and 28" wide. The tubular flowers are a rich dark lavender with white, and they look like you want to pet them because they have a velvety appearance. The lavender color is more prominent than the white. They flower in June for at least six weeks or more and they go with almost everything in your garden. These clump-forming plants perform best in full sun, although they can tolerate some shade. They grow in most soils and are comparatively easy to grow. Plant Alert—this is a good choice!

Thumbling Hearts Geranium

Another newbie is *Geranium* (Cinereum Group) 'Thumbling Hearts'. This is one attractive geranium. It is only 6" tall and a 12" spread after two years. It is a full sun plant, but in hotter climates I suggest some afternoon shade. It can be used in beds, borders, cottage gardens, or as a ground cover. It is best to cut back after flowering to encourage new foliage growth and more flowers. It may flower right into autumn. It likes a moist, well-drained soil. The foliage is deeply lobed and dark green. The flower is definitely

showy for such a small plant with petals veined lilac peach and the center a dark purple. It is hardy in Zones 5–9. Its form is a compact mound. (I have always said shorter is better.) I must tell you that this is plant pornography—it is not readily available yet.



photo courtesy of Darwin Nursery

The sunny golden colors of 'Golden Spring' make us aware that spring has arrived. It can mix with all the early bloomers.

Alyssum wulfenianum 'Golden Spring'

Formerly listed as *Alyssum saxatile* 'Compactum' or *Aurinia saxatilis* 'Compacta', 'Golden Spring' is an old-fashioned favorite, running around under several different Latin names, so stick with the common name Basket of Gold. This is the first vegetatively produced plant on the market. The blooms are an extremely bright yellow and it is hardy Zones 4–8. This is a great plant for early pollinators. It is 8" tall and 12" wide. It is considered semi-evergreen. This is a more compact, floriferous cultivar. After flowering, cut by a third to keep it bushy; the plant will thrive better not cutting back in fall. This is a good front of the border plant or edger that loves full sun and well-drained soil. It seems to be pest free. Deer and rabbits will usually not bother. It looks great with all early blooming bulbs and other early blooming spring perennials. If you have forgotten to use this plant in a long time, give it a second chance and you might be surprised.

Polygonatum 'Double Stuff'

Last, but not least, when this plant came out, it fell between the cracks. The former propagator at Bowman's Hill Wildflower Preserve, Bill Lamack, patented it with Terra Nova Nursery. My plants are alive and well. I still have not seen it in anyone's garden, so it must be underused. (Sometimes too

many new plants hit the market at the same time.) So I am giving it a shout-out. This lovely woodland plant is 26" tall and is taller than 'Double Wide'. It spreads by creeping rhizomes. It is known as *Polygonatum odoratum* var. *pluriflorum* and is generally called Solomon's seal or variegated Solomon's seal. It is hardy in Zones 2–8. It has the standard white flowers, but the leaf has a double white margin which makes it very showy. The foliage is lovely from spring to fall. Many florists use it in flower arrangements. It likes moist, well-drained soil. My plant has produced a slightly bigger plant, but has not travelled at all. Planted with green and white hostas or some lovely ferns, it makes a handsome combination from spring to fall.



photo courtesy of Bill Lamack/ Terra Nova Nursery

This lovely spring picture of 'Double Stuff' Solomon's seal and spring phlox happens to be a good combination and the Solomon's seal foliage stays beautiful into the fall.

Newish Encores

In addition to these newish plants, do not forget some of the spanking new cultivars on the horizon announced at March Into Spring: *Phlox* 'Running with Scissors', *Pennisetum* 'Etouffe', *Baptisia* 'Cinnamon Toast'. If this is too cutting edge, get your own Band-Aids!



Stephanie Cohen is an award-winning author, speaker, and designer. She has taught herbaceous plants and perennial design at Temple University for over 20 years. Her book, *The Perennial Gardener's Design Primer*, was a best seller for Storey Press for 2005. She continues to lecture and write and calls herself mature and seasoned, but never old!

Ed Note: If you did not attend Stephanie's talk at this year's March Into Spring, this article will give you an idea of the newish type of floral jewels you missed.