

Echinaceas are hot, hot, hot! Below, two-toned, yellow-and-red 'Flame Thrower' and fire engine red 'Hot Lava' scintillate the show garden at Terra Nova Nurseries. PHOTO COURTESY OF TERRA NOVA NURSERIES

Echinacea explosion

Colorful, new coneflower varieties are ready to light up the landscape

By Elizabeth Petersen

The common coneflower (*Echinacea*), denizen of the American prairie, has a long history of medicinal use, and its popularity as a health supplement continues unabated.

But in the last decade, a new generation of ornamental *Echinacea* has burst onto the horticultural scene with exciting potential — and new popularity — as a garden perennial.

Breeding programs in the United States and Europe have pumped out a veritable flood of selections that offer new colors, new flower forms, improved habits and fragrance.

Trying everything

The plant library on the website of wholesale perennial grower Blooming Nursery in Cornelius, Oregon, displays more than 80 named *Echinacea* forms, and new names are added every year.

Nursery owner Grace Dinsdale explained the long list includes all forms of *Echinacea* the nursery has tried to date. “We have planted everything we can get,” Dinsdale said of the influx

of new coneflower selections. “We are doing lots of work sorting through the new choices and figuring out the best ones for us to grow.”

Having tried and moved beyond quite a number already, Blooming Nursery has 42 named varieties in active production this year, a fact that confirms the rate at which new selections are reaching the market.

“It costs a lot to try so many varieties, but we grow a lot because *Echinacea* is an important, good-selling group for us.”

Considering the lack of options among coneflowers until recently, the new introductions offer “incredible varieties with lots of great performers,” Dinsdale said.

Realistically, some of the earlier forms that boasted groundbreaking colors may have reached the market a little prematurely. Some of the earlier releases were “not really ready for prime time,” Dinsdale said.

Aggressive marketing campaigns may have overstated the winning ways of some plants with exciting new colors and forms. Rather than steering clear ▶

of these new options, though, Dinsdale said that now is the time to trial and winnow down plants that provide a good value for customers.

At Blooming Nursery, longevity and stability are the topmost considerations in evaluating the new forms.

"People want variety and a good selection," Dinsdale said. However, some of the new coneflowers "sport out in all directions." Customers don't want plants that revert, sport or too closely resemble others on the market — hence the need for extensive trialing.

To achieve extremely strong, full plants, Blooming Nursery gives its finished *Echinacea* extended crop time, Dinsdale said. Plants in #1 pots are cut back and overwintered to promote more branching and the fullest possible plants.

Dinsdale considers 'Fatal Attraction'

to be "a real high point" in currently available *Echinacea*. The "excellent performer" from Piet Oudolf of The Netherlands has "the greatest habit and longevity. It doesn't sport, has deep, saturated violet flowers and dark stems. It's beautiful all season."

Production numbers remain high

'Green Jewel', another introduction from Oudolf, is also stable in the landscape and boasts lots of basal branching and persistent, all-green flowers. It is an under-sung selection, Dinsdale said, but starting to be discovered, so production numbers are slated to increase.

Blooming Nursery also grows an introduction from Itsaul Plants, 'Solar Flare', which boasts huge, up to 8-inch, intensely magenta flowers that hold their petals flat. As they age, the colors change

to produce a pleasing, varied effect.

Dinsdale also likes the Sombrero® series from Darwin Perennials. Plants don't need overwintering to perform well, are sturdy, well branched and compact, and have good hardiness and loads of flowers. Blooming Nursery produces a significant number of Sombreros, including 'Salsa Red', 'Adobe Orange' and 'Hot Coral'.

'Kim's Knee High', a 1999 introduction, was the first of the new generation to be patented and the first coneflower to be vegetatively produced. It "holds its own even among newer selections," Dinsdale said. Its flowers are the color of a standard purple coneflower. 'Kim's Knee High' is a manageable size and a good, solid performer with an excellent habit.

Blooming Nursery also trials, grows and recommends plants from Terra Nova Nurseries' *Echinacea* breeding program.

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'Meteor Yellow' is the "holy grail" of *Echinacea* breeding, according to plant breeder Dan Heims of Terra Nova Nurseries. Flowers have comet-shaped heads and long-lasting color. Another Terra Nova creation, 'Glowing Dream' (right), sports neon pink petals. PHOTOS COURTESY OF TERRA NOVA NURSERIES

Breeding the new generation

The current *Echinacea* craze can be traced to a color breakthrough achieved by Dr. Jim Ault of the Chicago Botanic Garden. The first orange-colored coneflower ever released, an interspecific cross between *E. paradoxa* and *E. tennesseensis*, *Echinacea* 'Art's Pride' (Orange Meadowbrite™ Coneflower), was introduced in 2004.

Since then, other breeders have continued efforts to break ground in the genus. Some have employed traditional techniques and others have used advanced tissue culture manipulations to take *Echinacea* in new directions.

"Things have changed a lot since the olden days," said Dan Heims, owner of Terra Nova Nurseries in Canby, Oregon, which is among the leaders in the tissue culture breeding of *Echinacea*.

Besides color and form breakthroughs, today's plants boast significantly more flowers on multiple crowns. Compared with earlier selections, each of

which would produce a few flowers on a single crown, Terra Nova's new introductions produce between 20 and 100 flowers on plants of comparable age.

"We develop a series and fill it in with a whole range of colors," Heims said.

The Prairie Pillars™ series — the first strain introduced by Terra Nova — is the standard bearer for all Terra Nova *Echinacea*. The 11 plants in the series boast upright form and large, single-flowered blooms on long, strong stems, ideal for cut flowers.

"Everything doesn't have to be short and squat," Heims said. "These plants are so much better and they increase over time. The crosses include a sub-species of *Echinacea* from the South, so they produce more crowns and more flowers."

Several of the plants Dinsdale recommended are part of the Prairie Pillars collection. 'Aloha' has wide, melon-yellow petals surrounding orange cones, nice fragrance and elegance that make a big impact planted in the border. ▶

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Strongly upright 'Leilani' has a beautiful, soft apricot and bright yellow flower.

Dinsdale really likes 'Fragrant Angel', which has loads of big, sweetly scented flowers with overlapping horizontal white petals and huge yellow cones. 'Fragrant Angel' was the highest-rated white-flowered coneflower in the Mt. Cuba Center *Echinacea* trials from 2007–2009 and performed well in the Dallas Arboretum Perennials for Purgatory trials.

Another Prairie Pillars selection, 'Tiki Torch' is a great flower with complex colors, yellow-orange flushed with deeper orange from the center out. "It is tough to grow, but so distinct with amazing tonal effects," Dinsdale said.

Plants in Terra Nova's Dream™ Series have superior landscape habits. They produce tight, well-branched mounds that are wider than tall, and a profusion of flowers on strong stems. "Full containers sell fast," Heims said.

Dinsdale is wild about 'Glowing Dream', which "at its peak has the most astonishing, almost fluorescent coral color," she said, and 'Tangerine Dream', which holds its clear orange bloom better than others. Both have wide, overlapping petals and a pleasant honey scent.

The nine selections in Terra Nova's Secret™ Series of double, anemone-like flowers offer the best range of colors, and the colors don't fade as they do in other selections, Heims said. The compact plants produce masses of large, double, fragrant flowers with a sturdy, medium habit. Great for cutting, plants in this series are hot sellers.

In the Meteor™ Series, Terra Nova offers a yellow double called 'Meteor Yellow'. The "holy grail" of *Echinacea* breeding, yellow anemone-type flowers have comet-shaped flower heads and long-lasting color. Improved crown formation and an upright compact habit produce plants with multiple stems of bloom.

Great for the front of the border or containers, the Dixie™ Series offers compact plants with many crowns and outstanding bud counts.

A new addition to the Prairie Stars™ Collection, 'Now Cheesier' has supersed-



'Rainbow Marcella', a Plants Nouveau selection from the Butterfly Series, is new for 2015. Flowers bloom pink and orange, and gradually change to dark mauve. 'Hot Papaya' (right) grows about 3 feet tall in the landscape, making it irresistible to butterflies. PHOTOS COURTESY OF PLANTS NOUVEAU



ed the popular 'Mac 'n' Cheese'. Dinsdale recommended the deep, golden yellow flower with cheddar yellow blooms that lighten slightly after weeks of heat.

As far as the future of *Echinacea*, Heims anticipates more saturation and richer, but not different, colors. There is potential for novel forms, though, he said.

From Holland and from seed

Skagit Gardens, a large wholesale grower in Mount Vernon, Washington, sells *Echinacea* as plug tray liners to other growers and as finished retail product in 4-inch and #1 pots.

Although the color breakthroughs have been fantastic, Skagit Gardens is focusing attention on the attributes of the plants, not just the flowers, product manager Brian Jacob said. Good vigor, a sturdy habit, full form and hardiness are characteristics that Skagit Gardens looks for.

"Good presence in the pot and good performance in the landscape are very important," Jacob said. "Customers want

easy garden plants, and some parts of the country need hardiness to Zone 4."

Many of the new *Echinacea* varieties grown at Skagit Gardens come from the breeding work of Arie Blom in The Netherlands.

Blom's Cone-flections™ plants, introduced by Plants Nouveau and named for their extremely large, dense, pompon centers, have been very popular. "People like the really full flowers and striking colors," Jacob said.

'Hot Papaya' boasts spicy red-orange tones, and 'Raspberry Truffle' sports rich pink flowers and dark brown stems.

Dinsdale agrees that the 2009 introduction 'Hot Papaya', with sizzling red orange petals and hot yellow orange center, is "so unique and popular." But, she has observed an occasional tall, gangly branch sprouting from the otherwise compact plant.

The more compact Butterfly™ Series of single-flowered plants grown by Skagit Gardens has some outstanding

choices too, Jacob said, most notably bright yellow 'Cleopatra' and tangerine orange 'Julia'.

Skagit Gardens added newer choices from this extremely floriferous series for 2015, too. 'Rainbow Marcella' represents another color breakthrough, Jacob said, with flowers that emerge orange and gradually change to purple. "Flowers produce a dramatic effect, like swirls of different sorbet colors."

Two additional Butterfly newcomers are also notable. 'Orange Skipper' produces glowing, almost neon, tangerine blooms, and 'Golden Skipper' has saturated golden tones.

Skagit Gardens also produces newer seed-grown varieties of *Echinacea*, which have the benefit of costing less than plants from tissue culture while still offering unique colors, good habit, loads of flowers, and flowering the first year. 'PowWow Wild Berry' from PanAmerican Seed, the 2010 All-America Selections Flower Award Winner, boasts compact size with good branching and vivid deep rose-purple flowers that retain their color well.

'Cheyenne Spirit' seed (2013 AAS winner) offers a brilliant mix of colors, including yellow, orange, red, purple and white. Well-branched and heavy blooming, these plants are good choices for colder parts of the country, since they perform well even to Zone 4.

Still trying

Displayed on the front of Portland, Oregon, ANLD 2015 Garden Tour Tickets and postcards are photos of a gaggle of *Echinacea* taken in the garden of designer Phil Thornburg (Winterbloom Inc.), which will be on the tour this June.

Unfortunately, Thornburg's experience with "a tomato orange variety, a lovely yellow variety and a dwarfish variety is that after two winters all of them disappeared and only the diehard fuchsia pink purpureas are now out there ready to perform this next summer. I was disappointed, to say the least," he said.

What happened? Hard to know, but Thornburg wonders if these prairie plants simply don't like the wet win- ▶



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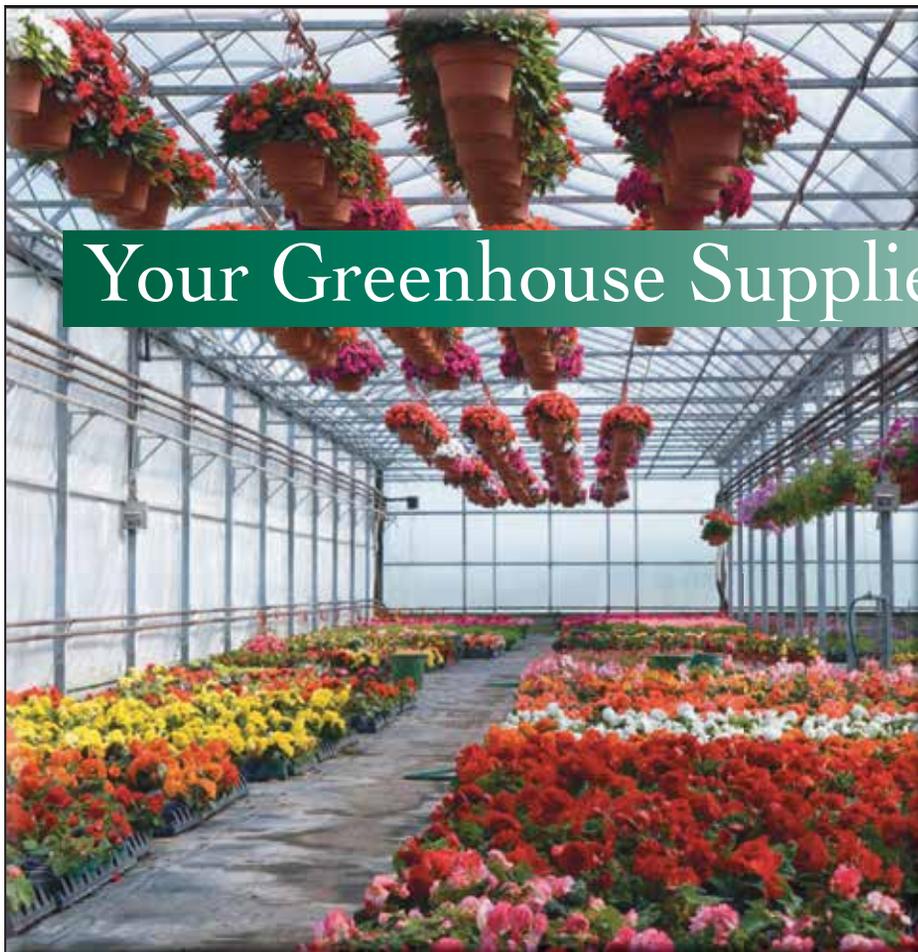
"I am not against the little buggers," Thornburg said. "It just seems the ones that like it here west of the mountains are the *E. purpurea* variants and then they need full sun and good drainage. Heavy soil with not enough drainage can be a problem, even if plants are positioned in full baking sun in the summer."

Dan Heims suggests removing the flowers from a small plant to allow it to form a stronger crown, or better yet, try a second year plant. "Following the formula that Terra Nova provides growers for growing *Echinacea* yields good results," he said. ☺

Elizabeth Petersen writes for the garden industry and teaches SAT/ACT test prep at www.satpreppdx.com. She can be reached at gardenwrite@comcast.net or satpreppdx@comcast.net.



A new addition to the Prairie Stars™ Collection, 'Now Cheesier' produces super-sized, cheddar-colored flowers, 3 inches or greater. PHOTO COURTESY OF TERRA NOVA NURSERIES



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