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LEISURE

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10:53am Thursday 2nd October 2008

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VAL BOURNE on an American producer's rich variety of colourful heucheras

I was lucky enough to enjoy a sunny day this summer (one of the very few) looking at heucheras at a nursery in Hampshire. The star of the show was a larger-than-life American called Dan Heims, part owner of a famous Oregon nursery called Terra Nova. This nursery has been breeding heucheras for over ten years, producing a huge range including the almost edible 'Chocolate Ruffles', 'Lime Rickey', 'Amber Waves', 'Peach Flambe' and 'Plum Royale'.

These colourful foliage plants have made their way into Britain in plug form and thence found themselves on nursery and garden centre benches. Countless gardeners must have bought them and then wondered what to plant them with. Most are baffled by the choice and number on offer. But this purely American genus, which is part of the Saxifrage family, is naturally diverse in form and foliage. Terra Nova has exploited this richness, helping to turn the heuchera from purely a cut-flower delicacy into an eye-catching foliage plant.

The showiest heucheras in nature grow in cool, woodland settings. Therefore most heucheras prefer friable soil and semi-shade in the garden setting. The ones with paler leaves (in lime and peach) are tricky in my opinion because they need some sunshine in order to keep their light colour. But the sun has to be gentle: they will frazzle in strong sunlight. The best option is placing them where they only get morning sun.

Heucheras have a tendency to 'sport' naturally, producing different coloured shoots from the parent plant, and Dan Heims, having noticed this, started to breed and collect them in 1973. 'Midnight Rose', for instance, is a pink-flecked sport of the shiny black-leaved 'Obsidian'. Others are deliberately hybridised by nursery workers. Seedlings are then raised en masse before the very best, perhaps ten out of hundreds of seedlings, are selected and grown on before being bulked up by micropropagation.

When you have a plant with sumptuous leaves, it's desirable if that foliage can look good in winter weather. But there are two problems. Hardiness varies in different hybrids and the dark-leaved forms are lost against the ground in dull winter weather. The peach and lime-leaved ones often look tatty, so perhaps heucheras should be relegated to winter containers placed in sheltered sites. The best I have found for winter foliage in the ground is H. americana 'Eco magnifolia'.

My most favourite heuchera of the moment was planted early this year and it's called 'Rave On'. It combines bright-pink upright flowers and silvered foliage on a neat, compact plant. The flowers are vibrant, weather-resistant (and they were tested this year) and they keep a-coming. I got it from Bob Brown of Cotswold Garden Flowers (www.cgf.net/ tel 01386 833849) but I suspect the winter leaves are going to be rather drab and green.

The Oxford and District Group of Alpine Garden Society has an interesting programme over the winter, involving expert talks about flora from different parts of the world. On



Judging a fine display of heucheras

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Wednesday, Jim Almond will speak on the adventures of an alpine enthusiast. Prof Hilary Birks from Sweden will show her slides of bulbous and alpine plants from the Zagros Mountains of Iran on November 12. But the highlight will be a visit from Jan Ruksans, a world-renowned bulb nurseryman from Latvia on March 11.

Meetings are held on the second Wednesday of every month at Exeter Hall in Kidlington at 7.30pm. Visitors and new members are always welcome. This lively group is well worth joining.

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