



# The American GARDENER®

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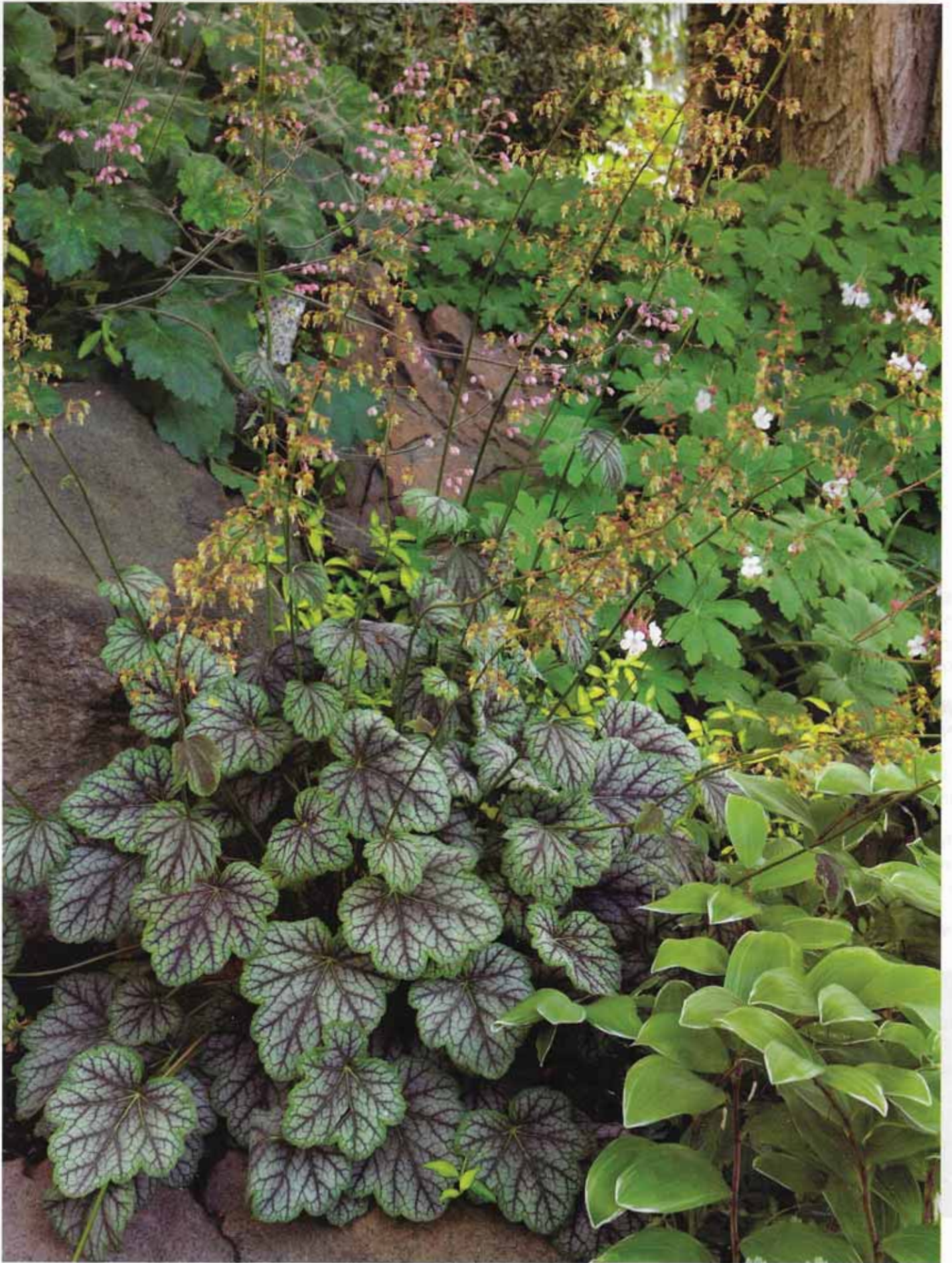
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Heucheras





**H**eucheras (*Heuchera* spp.), also known as coral bells and alumroot, are having a heyday. In fact, these herbaceous perennials have been basking in the limelight for at least a couple of decades and still going strong. They are infinitely adaptable in garden designs and trendily native to North America, so it's hard to argue that heucheras are not deserving of all the brouhaha from gardeners—and attention from plant breeders—that they've received.

In addition to the more than 50 known heuchera species, many of which are lovely in their own right, there are count-

wands of tiny flowers above the foliage. He totally understands why this species has won hearts. Although New England is at the northern edge of the plant's hardiness zone, this denizen of stream banks and forests is a valuable garden plant. Among other virtues, it supports pollinators including a specialist cellophane bee whose diminishing population has prompted concern in the New England region. Although the species can be challenging to obtain, selections 'Dale's Strain' and 'Green Spice' can be readily found in the trade.

Similarly, hairy alumroot (*H. villosa*,

Zones 4–8) holds an important place in New England native ecosystems. "You would be hard pressed to find the pure species for sale at local nurseries," according to Lorimer, however, 'Autumn Bride' is the more readily available selection of this drought-tolerant plant that also supports a needy contingent of specialist bees. Beyond its handsome foliage, 'Autumn Bride' produces plump plumes of showy flowers in autumn that linger late and fill a timeframe when most autumn performers have fizzled for the season. In addition, 'Autumn Bride' is shade-loving and drought-tolerant, pop-

# Hue and Cry Over Heucheras

For help in choosing among the dizzying array of heuchera species and selections, here are some suggestions from trial gardens and regional experts. BY TOVAH MARTIN

less hybrid heucheras on the market with green, red, copper, bronze, silver, and purple leaves. Those leaves are cleft, curly, rounded, smooth, shiny, or felted. You can find heucheras varying in size from small nuggets to broader rosettes. Some also bear lovely flowers on tall stems that wave above the foliage. Their tolerance for sun or shade is also variable depending on parentage and region. While many gardeners seem to appreciate these nearly endless choices, others are beginning to wonder if it's not too much of a good thing. So I asked some regional experts to weigh in on their favorites.

## MERITS OF THE SPECIES

As director of horticulture for the Native Plant Trust in Framingham, Massachusetts, Uli Lorimer has a lot of good things to say about heucheras... in their pure form. In particular, he deems the Northeast native American alumroot (*Heuchera americana*, USDA Zones 4–9) to be "rightfully prized for the shade garden," with its rosette of handsome leaves and holding thin



**Above:** Coral bells (*Heuchera sanguinea*) is prized for its showy flowers, which draw hummingbirds. **Opposite page:** 'Green Spice', a selection of American alumroot, glimmers in a shady site.

ulating a niche that many home gardeners struggle to fill.

Also an important heuchera species native to cold regions of this country, Richardson's alumroot (*H. richardsonii*, Zones 4–8) is a prairie plant custom made to tolerate extreme environments. According to Lorimer, Richardson's alumroot is a particularly adaptable member of the family equally comfortable in hot, dry Southern climates in full sun as it is cold hardy in Upper Midwest gardens. Drought tolerance is its hallmark—it has been known to grow happily in gravel. In its native prairie, *H. richardsonii* can hold its own beside prairie grasses, but in a garden setting, Lorimer suggests mulching the shallow roots. It supports many native pollinators and draws hummingbirds.

Heucheras have adapted to many habitats throughout North America. California boasts the native small-flowered alumroot (*H. micrantha*, Zones 4/5–8) and shaggy-hair alumroot (*H. hirsutissima*, Zones 5–9) as well as several other species, while *H. bracteata*,

*H. hallii*, and *H. parvifolia* inhabit the Rocky Mountains. Coral bells (*H. sanguinea*, Zones 3–8), native to New Mexico and Arizona, boasts some of the showiest blossoms in the clan. These are just a few standouts among the numerous North American species.

Lorimer has concerns about the proliferation of brightly hued heuchera cultivars. As an advocate for ecological function, he sees nothing lacking in the species. “Mother Nature’s choices are always better,” he says. “Species have the ability to maintain more connections with wildlife than some cultivated plants.” The counterpoint is that hybridization has brought heucheras to the forefront for gardeners, luring in newbies and seasoned veterans alike. Most local nurseries are amply stocked with several flashy heucheras that entice their customers into the native plant realm. These are plants that perform beautifully in a home landscape and are probably responsible for successfully creating converts to the native plant cause. On that level, Lorimer understands their value. “Getting folks new to native plant gardening engaged is always important, and aesthetics play a huge part,” he acknowledges.

### THE TREND SETTER

The origins of hybrid heuchera mania can be traced to Dan Heims, who in the late 1980s was enjoying a successful career as a landscape designer with a yen for plant collecting. While visiting iris and hosta hybridizer Chet Tompkins’ home and nursery in Canby, Oregon, Heims encountered ‘Eco Magnifolia’, a hybrid of American alumroot with velvety chartreuse leaves and a copper blush. That plant, originally bred by Don Jacobs of Georgia, literally changed Heim’s life. “I was into hostas at the time and heucheras thrive in the same conditions,” says Heims. Not only did that early heuchera hybrid put Heims on a totally different career trajectory, it jumpstarted a breeding trend that put a new spin on our gardens.

Heims pivoted into plant breeding and founded the Oregon-based Terra Nova Nurseries, now with 150-plus heuchera variations under its belt (and more being introduced as we speak) as well as breeding series in many other genera,

notably tickseed, coneflowers, penstemons, lungworts (*Pulmonaria* spp.), and foamy bells (*Tiarella* spp.).

Initially, Heims was smitten by the leaf coloration that is the heuchera’s hallmark. But the colorful leaf trait was only one aspect in the cocktail of attributes that gardeners find enticing—including hardiness, a diversity in size, and a range of flower colors and presentations. When asked to choose a favorite heuchera from the vast number of introductions that Terra Nova Nurseries has sent out into the gardening world, Heims cannot commit, waffling between Forever® ‘Purple’ and ‘Black Taffeta’.

Although the garden industry tends to promote the latest introductions, Heims notes that plants like the 2002 introduction ‘Obsidian’ have withstood

the test of time. Their popularity can be explained by their congeniality. Heucheras fill a shade slot that cries for color. Plants like ‘Lime Marmalade’ (another one of Heims’ favorites) are totally cool with low light situations. In an eco-savvy climate where gardeners are looking for plants that can stand in as mulch replacements in density plantings that layer growing things from the ground up, heucheras are standouts.

### EVALUATING HEUCHERAS

Many other breeders have joined the heuchera hybridizing frenzy, swelling the offerings at garden centers. As heuchera cultivars proliferated, they sparked other trends. Richard Hawke, director of ornamental plant research at the Chicago Botanic Garden in Illinois,



Eye-catching ‘Lime Marmalade’ forms a dome-shaped clump of ruffled, bright chartreuse foliage that looks great overlapping the edge of a container.



Above: Aptly named 'Cherry Cola' has deep reddish-purple foliage and cherry-red flowers held aloft on tall stems. Left: 'Silver Gumdrop' has pewter-colored foliage with prominent veining.

credits heucheras with triggering some of the earliest American trial gardens that weren't devoted solely to annuals. "Heucheras got us motivated to do a trial like [the Royal Horticultural Society's] Wisley," Hawke recalls. The Chicago Botanic Garden already had several heucheras in their collection by the 1980s, with 'Palace Purple' being a standout from the early inventory. By the early 1990s, a trial was launched that contin-

## Resources

**An Evaluation Study of Coral Bells** by Richard Hawke, Plant Evaluation Notes #21, Chicago Botanic Garden, Glencoe, IL, 2003. [www.chicagobotanic.org/downloads/planteval\\_notes/no21\\_coralbells.pdf](http://www.chicagobotanic.org/downloads/planteval_notes/no21_coralbells.pdf).

**Herbaceous Perennial Plants** (4th ed.) by Allan M. Armitage. Stipes Publishing, Champaign, IL, 2020.

**Heucheras and Heucherellas: Coral Bells and Foamy Bells** by Dan Heims and Grahame Ware. Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2005.

## Sources

**American Meadows**, Shelburne, VT. [americanmeadows.com](http://americanmeadows.com).

**Bluestone Perennials**, Madison, OH. [bluestoneperennials.com](http://bluestoneperennials.com).

**Digging Dog Nursery**, Albion, CA. [diggingdog.com](http://diggingdog.com).

**Grow Joy**, Berne, IN. [growjoy.com](http://growjoy.com).

**Nature Hills**, Omaha, NE. [naturehills.com](http://naturehills.com).

**White Flower Farm**, Litchfield, CT. [whiteflowerfarm.com](http://whiteflowerfarm.com).

**Wilson Bros Gardens**, McDonough, GA. [wilsonbrosgardens.com](http://wilsonbrosgardens.com).

ues into the present (see "Resources," above). Since its inception, almost 200 heucheras have been evaluated for their attributes. Unfortunately, many cultivars with impressive performance tallies have been dropped because they are no longer available. Like trends in fashion, heucheras go in and out of style. In addition to 'Palace Purple' (introduced in 1986), 'Cherry Cola' (2010) is another "relative oldie but goodie" with staying power. "I just love it," Hawke gushes. "Every part of it is the same color including the foliage and flowers."

Hawke's role as a plant evaluator is to weigh beauty against adaptability. 'Cherry Cola', for instance, thrives in both shade and full sun. "In more sun, its colors become more vibrant," he has found. Similarly, trial standouts Dolce® 'Silver Gumdrop' and Dolce® 'Wildberry' also



tolerate full sun as well as soil that can be rock hard clay with a tendency to become too soggy in a rainy season.

Other features that play into Hawke's evaluation include winter hardiness, shade and sun tolerance, and disease and pest resistance. "It's not just winter hardiness," he explains, "it's the plant's overall survivability. Ornamental qualities actually are last but not least in our trial ratings." One issue that he—and many other gardeners—experienced relates to the tendency for heuchera crowns to rise above the soil level, which is caused by winter heaving

of the shallow-rooted plants. To combat this, Heims suggests mulching two to three inches around the plants.

Aside from that issue, Hawke says many heucheras "did fairly well" in the trials. His personal favorite is 'Carnival Cinnamon Stick'. As he explained, "I'm a child of the 1970s, I can't resist the amazing quality of the leaf colors—including red, orange, and rusty brown." But wind him up and he'll launch into a long list of personal picks including 'Carnival Watermelon', 'Black Forest Cake', Dressed Up® 'Ball Gown', and 'Obsidian.'



**Left:** Growing with red-hot pokers, 'Caramel' is popular for its two-tone foliage. **Top:** Native to rocky outcrops, hairy alumroot grows well in crevice gardens and stone walls. **Above:** Forever® 'Purple' holds its own in a striking container.



Although Hawke fully understands why the public tends to be fixated with heuchera foliage, he mentioned that flowers are a facet of the plant that should not be overlooked and certainly not removed. “People look for foliage on heucheras, but the flowers add movement and texture,” he notes.

### GROWING GUIDELINES

Sam Hoadley, the manager of horticultural research at Mt. Cuba Center in Hockessin, Delaware, agrees that flowers are a neglected component of the heuchera package. From 2012 to 2014, Mt. Cuba hosted a heuchera trial that included 85 cultivars. Use of a shade structure allowed the researchers to evaluate the focus group’s performance in sun versus shade. Their finding was that heucheras in general preferred about 60 percent shade. “Bright high shade was preferable,” Hoadley explains. Some heucheras tolerated sun, while chartreuse cultivars tended to burn in strong direct light. That said, semi-sun tolerant ‘Citronella’ proved a top performer. Of the darker burgundy-leaved cultivars, ‘Cajun Fire’ and ‘Bronze Wave’ were standouts. A favorite was the crowd-pleasing ‘Caramel’, which remains a mainstay for the copper-colored group.

PHOTO: TOVAH MARTIN

## HEUCHERAS AS HOUSEPLANTS

In addition to growing heucheras in my garden, I have found them to be colorful and practical alternatives to other vivid-leaved indoor garden holdouts like rex begonias. Either obtained at those much-anticipated end-of-season sales when nurseries mark down the prices of their perennials or “repurposed” by digging a few clumps from my garden in autumn, any



*Heuchera Dolce*® ‘Cherry Truffles’ blooms at a sunny window in the author’s house.

heuchera can make the leap onto the windowsill with the greatest of ease. I take advantage of all the leaf hues available to mix and match into vignettes reminiscent of the garden. They pair beautifully with ferns, tiarellas, and even dwarf hostas. Indoors, heucheras will tolerate an east-, west- or south-facing window. Due to their extensive root system, they should be given generous containers—not only with ample depth but also wide girth. Provide them with a potting soil that includes plenty of organic matter. Remember to water regularly and rotate to expose all sides to good light. If stressed, a heuchera can fall victim to aphids, but if watered regularly and with ample light, your plant should remain problem-free, furnishing months of pleasure. —T.M.

While studying heucheras, Hoadley has learned volumes about their cultivation preferences. “Gardeners pamper them too much,” is his general impression. He has discovered heucheras happily seeding themselves into cracks in pavement and along the edge of sidewalks—which has led him to advise that sharp drainage is necessary for their wellbeing. “They are happiest when their crowns seldom get wet,” he suggests. “If sited correctly, they can be long-lived perennials.” At the initial Mt. Cuba trial, the vast majority of heucheras survived throughout the study. “We lost just seven varieties,” he notes.

In addition to heuchera’s performance in garden beds, Hoadley is a major advocate for their use in containers, including winter pots. For containers, ‘Spellbound’ has won Hoadley’s accolades, especially on the strength of the pink blush it gains in chilly weather. If given a gradual acclimation to cold weather, many heuchera

cultivars will retain their foliage color throughout the winter months.

Heucheras are incredibly versatile plants that should be enlisted liberally in all aspects of gardening. Whether you opt for straight species or selections, add them as edging, as the “ground level” in a layered garden, as “green mulch,” to lend color to a shade garden, or to host native insects, these plants are infinitely valuable. Considering all their attributes, I think we can easily say that you can never have too much of a good thing. ■

*Garden writer, lecturer, photographer and goatherd Tovah Martin stewards Furthermore, her seven-acre organic informal farmscape in Connecticut, where she strives to create habitat for as many creatures as possible. She is the author of several books including her most recent award-winning title, The Garden in Every Sense and Season.*