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Plantation Picks: Coral Bells ring out

BY MARY HIRSHFELD • SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL • AUGUST 29, 2008

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Coral bells have become like hostas. There are too many to choose from — and more selections become available every year. However, they are so intriguing that every spring I manage to find a place for at least one more in Plantations' collections.

For decades, coral bells, or alumroot (*Heuchera* spp.), were grown for their bright red, pink or white flowers that brighten the garden, make wonderful, long-lasting cut flowers and feed the hummingbirds. Although all members of the genus *Heuchera* are native to North America, the initial hybridization work aimed at developing plants with larger, more richly colored flowers was done in England and France, most notably at Alan Bloom's Bressingham Nursery. The resulting hybrids were grouped under the name *H. xbrizioides*, a catch-all name for hybrids involving *H. sanguinea* and *H. Americana*.

The resultant hybrids combine the bright pink and red flowers of the western *H. sanguinea* with the durability of the *H. Americana*, an eastern species with small, nondescript white flowers.

History In The U.S.

The first group to be widely grown in the United States were the "Bressingham Hybrids," offering a range of vivid pink to red blossoms. While these are good, stalwart plants for full sun or part shade, and even tolerate periodic dry conditions, they have limited variation in flower color and plant form. Diversity in the *Heuchera* world really began to expand with the introduction in the early 1980s of *H. micrantha* "Palace Purple." This variant, discovered in the collections of England's Royal Botanic Gardens by curator Brian Halliwell, is a tough, adaptable and stunning foliage plant with sharply toothed purple leaves. It received the Perennial Plant Association's plant of the year award for 1991.

Around the same time, two strains of *Heuchera* were selected in the United States for their ornamental foliage. Dale Hendricks of North Creek Nurseries in southern Pennsylvania discovered an exceptionally attractive form of *H. americana* with purple veins and silver mottling, which was introduced as "Dale's Strain." Later, Nancy Goodwin noticed several seedlings from a cross between "Palace Purple" and "Dale's Strain" that had purple foliage with subtle silver veining. She introduced the strain as "Montrose Ruby," commemorating her Montrose nursery in North Carolina. Once these three plants became available, plant breeders began to cross them in various combinations, and an astonishing array of new hybrids began to hit the

market.

Dan Heims' Terra Nova nursery in Oregon has almost become synonymous with the word *Heuchera*. Their



Heuchera 'Silver Maps' (Provided)

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breeding program continues to break new ground with the genus. "Green Spice" is one of my favorites. Its sultry foliage has pronounced purple veins in the leaf center, which shade to silver with a green margin. Its woody appearance fits nicely within our more naturalistic plantings, where other coral bells would look out of place. "Obsidian" has a reflective glassy quality to its glossy black-purple leaves — it really caught my attention the first time I saw it. "Midnight Rose" is an elegant variant of "Obsidian." Its dark purple leaves are flecked with pink in spring; these gradually cover more of the leaf surface as the summer progresses.

"Marmalade" is a larger and more vigorous version of "Amber Waves" with ruffled leaves of yellow ocher above and pink beneath. "Hollywood" and "Rave On" combine the best of both flower and foliage qualities with dense rich pink flower spikes above purple foliage that is liberally splashed with silver. "Hollywood" even reblooms after its early summer display.

Charles Oliver at the Primrose Path nursery in Pennsylvania has introduced several diminutive, alpine, Rocky Mountain species of Heuchera into his mix, creating small-statured — almost miniature — extremely floriferous coral bells well-suited for rock gardens. One of his selections, "Petite Pearl Fairy" forms a tiny bun of purple leaves above which a profusion of 12-inch-tall spires of soft pink flowers perches in spring. Visitors are invariably drawn to this plant when it is in bloom. It seems nobody can walk past it without wanting to know its name; every year our aluminum plant label gets bent and finally broken in half.

Latest Addition

The latest addition to the rich palette of coral bells comes from French plant breeder Thierry Delabroye, who is making crosses with hairy alumroot (*H. villosa*) to obtain more heat- and sun-tolerant [plants](#) with larger leaves. Delabroye's hybrids emphasize improved foliage in yellow, orange and brown shades. "Caramel" displays large, fuzzy, coarsely-toothed, yellow-orange leaves with pale purple undersides; these form a 12-inch-tall mound. "Citronelle" has smaller, more rounded, scallop-edged, bright chartreuse leaves, and a very compact habit. Much larger is "Brownies"; its chocolate-brown leaves have purple undersides. This impressive plant reaches 15 inches in height and more than two feet across.

Coral bells perform best in lightly shaded habitats with amply moist — but not soggy — soil. Well-cared-for plants are very durable, and cultivars can be combined nicely to provide many seasons of colorful foliage in the shade garden — so don't limit yourself to just one! For inspiration, come visit Cornell Plantations, where the best places to see coral bells are in the Groundcover Collection and along the Treman Woodland Walk.

Mary Hirshfeld is director of horticulture at Cornell Plantations. Cornell Plantations is the botanical garden, arboretum and natural areas of Cornell University. For more information, or to become a member, visit our Gift Shop at One Plantations Road, Ithaca, NY 14850. "Plantation Picks" is published monthly in Life.

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