

September 2009

Plants of the Month

Zinnia

Zinnia elegans 'Magellan Coral'

Think fall--not just summer--when you think of zinnias. The vibrant colors of this Mexican native flourish well into October after bursting with color all summer. Plant zinnias directly into soil when soil warms in spring. Germination occurs in only 4 to 7 days. Pinch young flowers to encourage branching. Zinnias come in a mindboggling array of colors and varieties. They last a long time in a vase and are often grown for cutting beds. Cutting stimulates more flowers. Zinnias also make great borders, bedding, or container plants. Zinnias tolerate some drought, but do not allow them to wilt. Water at the base to avoid powdery mildew on leaves.



Night Blooming Cereus, Queen of the Night

Epiphyllum oxypetalum

Are you a fan of unusual plants? Plants so extraordinary that parties celebrate their flower opening? Then night blooming cereus should be in your collection. This fascinating member of the cactus family produces flushes of large, pure white, intoxicatingly fragrant flowers in July and August. One catch however: flowers open all at once after sunset and close by morning. Hence another common name-- Queen of the Night. Grow them in containers or hanging baskets in a well-drained soil mix and partial sun. These large fleshy-leaved houseplants need to be overwintered indoors. Then in summer throw an evening party to celebrate the opening of these beautiful gifts of nature.



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American Sweetgum Tree ***Liquidambar styraciflua***

Fall colors of this starry-leaved tree can be every bit as spectacular as a sugar maple, plus it is native to Maryland heat and humidity. Attaining 60' or more, sweetgums are pyramidal in youth, developing a more rounded crown at maturity. Young wood can have attractive ridges, giving way to deeply furrowed bark on trunks. Sweetgum fruits dry into 1" brown "gumballs" that create winter interest and drop off by April. While considered decorative, these balls are hard and prickly to bare feet. They decompose in lawns but don't plant them over walks or driveways. 'Rotundiloba' is a sterile cultivar which produces no gumballs, however its leaves have rounded lobes, without the starry points.



Indian grass 'Sioux Blue' ***Sorghastrum nutans* 'Sioux Blue'**

It's a small thrill to grow Indian grass, realizing it once covered the vast Great Plains prairie, second only to big bluestem. In the east, it tended to reach lesser heights. At six feet, 'Sioux Blue' was evaluated at Longwood Garden and proved itself worthy of inclusion in the home garden. Its powder blue foliage handles heat and drought well once established. In late summer, inflorescences open loose and feathery, becoming narrower as they dry. Winter color is a pale gold. Cut back in spring. Leaves are free of foliar disease that bothers some blue-leaved panicums. Reseeds readily.

