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GROWTH PLAYS

When to Gamble on New Plants

With so many varieties on the way, fall planting carries an added risk: buyer's remorse

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Fall used to be simpler for gardeners. The heavy digging was over, the summer weeding was done and there was plenty of time to put in some shrubs, perennial flowers and bulbs to enjoy come spring.

Now autumn is turning into a time to place bets. You can get a good deal now on a plant that's been marked down for the end of the season -- but you might kick yourself when you see the spiffed-up flowers, trees and shrubs next spring in catalogs and garden centers. With horticulture companies speeding up their introduction of new and supposedly improved versions, investing time and money in plants in the fall is starting to feel like going car shopping just before the new models come out.

Yet if you wait until spring to buy the latest thing -- which almost certainly will be more costly than the previous latest thing -- you may be disappointed by a plant that has been rushed to market without enough time for testing.

So add buyer's remorse to gardeners' old concerns about weather, pests and disease. It's a side effect of the increasing emphasis on new models of plants -- like new models of computers and cellphones -- every year. This has been a boon for gardeners who want disease-resistant roses or coneflowers in different colors. But it has also created a kind of stress that many of us are seeking to escape when we retreat to the garden.

Among the innovations in the pipeline for next spring, according to company executives, are a mimosa tree with unusual chocolate-brown leaves from Hines Horticulture, a beauty bush with surprising golden-yellow foliage from Proven Winners ColorChoice and a zinnia with extremely white blooms from Burpee. (One item you won't find in Burpee's 2007 catalog is a tomato whose inside resembles a wagon wheel when sliced. "You want to see something you've never seen before," says George Ball, Burpee's president, but he decided this one was just too odd.)

Hydrangeas are attracting particular attention. George Atkinson, director of marketing at Zelenka Nursery, a big commercial plant grower, says the innovation and growth in the hydrangea market is the strongest trend he's seen in his 23 years in the horticulture business. "It's a hot plant genus," he says.

This follows one of the most successful plant introductions in years, the Endless Summer-brand hydrangeas. About four million have been sold since Bailey Nurseries introduced them in 2003. Unlike hydrangeas that flower on last year's stems, these flower on this year's growth, so they can bloom even if they have died to the ground in a Northern winter. That's rare for "mophead" hydrangeas, so called for

their big pink or blue blooms. And Endless Summer flowers nearly all summer long, another unusual trait.

Yet Endless Summer wasn't quite the breakthrough its marketers advertised. There have been other hydrangeas that bloom on this year's stems, including Penny Mac (though some say it isn't as disease-resistant as Endless Summer). And some gardeners, including me, have discovered that the blooms of Endless Summer aren't really endless.

Next spring we'll see even more heavily promoted hydrangeas. Bailey Nurseries plans a big push for Light-O-Day, which has green-and-white foliage; Bailey claims it's the first variegated-leaf hydrangea hardy to growing Zone 5, which covers many Northern states. And Zelenka will promote Peppermint, another version of its Forever & Ever hydrangeas, whose bloom habit is like Endless Summer's.

Is this too much of a good thing? "We may be beginning to confuse the consumer," says Steve Hutton, president of big plant grower Conard-Pyle. This year, for the first time, he says, his company was left with unsold hydrangeas out of the 100,000 it grew, though he still believes hydrangea sales haven't peaked.

There's no doubt the industry will continue to accelerate plant introductions. "We are seeing huge demand for new varieties," especially from independent garden centers that face growing competition from chain stores, says Tim Wood, product development and marketing manager at Spring Meadow Nursery, a major plant breeder and grower.

The Internet plays a role as well. Mail-order sellers are listing more varieties partly because they can sell limited runs and pull them from their online catalogs when they sell out. With print catalogs, which buyers keep for months, it only makes sense to list a plant if the supplier has a huge stock on hand.

The industry also is speeding up the launch of plants because of a change in patent laws. Companies that want to protect their interest in a plant they have discovered or developed overseas, where many plants originate, now have to file for a U.S. patent within one year of the plant's first sale abroad. And once a company starts the patent process, it usually starts to sell the plant in the U.S. to begin recovering costs, says Nicholas Staddon, director of plant introductions at Monrovia, a big commercial grower. That can compress the traditional three- to five-year testing of new plants to a year or so.

"There's this huge rush to market with all these new plants, and at times I believe the trialing and evaluation process is put on the back burner," says Mr. Staddon. So plants may not flourish as their marketers promise.

As for me, I'm wondering whether I should plant the Endless Summer Blushing Bride, out this year, or hold off until spring for the Pinky Winky hydrangea.

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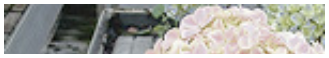
The 2007 Models

In the spring, the garden industry will release another crop of new plants, promising different flower colors or shapes, better disease-resistance or other attributes. Here are three varieties to look for next year.

Hydrangea Forever & Ever Peppermint



Who's behind it: Zelenka Nursery

What's new: The color of the flowers -- this variegated-flower hydrangea has pink or blue petals outlined in white. Like some other recent varieties, it's designed to bloom even in the north and to rebloom all summer.

To plant this fall: Current Forever & Ever or Endless Summer hydrangeas, which also bloom in the north and rebloom

Salvia HeatWave

Who's behind it: Monrovia Nursery

What's new: Salvias are common garden plants, but this variety is supposed to be bushier, more compact and have more blooms. Yet it's hardy only to zone 7.

To plant this fall: For warm-colored blooms you could go with Salvia Rose Queen, which has pink flowers. Many dependable perennial varieties have blue blooms, such as May Night and East Friesland. All these are hardy in colder regions.

Weigela My Monet

Who's behind it: Proven Winners ColorChoice/Spring Meadow Nursery

What's new: Its small size. Because this unusual miniature weigela grows only 12 to 18 inches high, it can fit in small spaces or containers.

To plant this fall: No other miniature weigelas with variegated leaves are available, but you can find dwarf weigelas in other leaf colors, such as Midnight Wine, which has burgundy foliage.

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