Summer of 2016 Texas Superstar Plants

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Some of you may want to join me in trying several of the new Texas Superstar offerings for 2016.

Over the last 30 years, a team of Texas A&M AgriLife horticulturists representing all of the state have conducted field trials and identified landscape plants worthy of being designated a Texas Superstar.

For a long time Dr. Jerry Parsons was the San Antonio area representative. Even in retirement he continues to have input on the choices. Our current representative is the Bexar County horticulturist David Rodriguez.

Sixty eight Texas Superstar Plants have been identified during the history of the program. Some of my favorites include poinciana, “New Gold” esperanza, Cora vinca, firebush, and Belinda’s Dream rose. For a full list visit the Superstar website at TexasSuperstar.com.

Area retail nurseries have two new Texas Superstars for the shady part of the landscape that I am excited about trying this spring, the “Whopper begonia” and another that is called the “Brazilian Red Hots Alternanthera”.

Waxleaf (semperfloren) begonias are one of my favorite annual color plants for shade. They are very decorative and look fragile but are surprisingly drought tolerant and pest-free. The “Whopper” is a wax leaf begonia on steroids. The selection has large leaves and large flowers to produce a plant up to 30 inches tall and 16inches in diameter.

Like its smaller cousin the “Whopper’ is available with green or bronze foliage and red or rose colored flowers. Use the Whopper in containers or massed plantings. In their official write up, the evaluators report that “Whopper”, like the regular semperfloren begonia can be used in the sun if it is planted now so it has time to become well established before the hottest part of summer. I may try it in morning sun but most of my “Whoppers” will be planted in the shade.

The second new Texas Superstar that I am going to try this spring is “Brazilian Red Hots Alternanthera”. It is described as a “mounding version of Joseph’s Coat with showy hot pink and rose outlined foliage”. “Red Hots” grows to 36 inch tall and 18 inches wide.

The Superstar team recommends that “Red Hots” be used in the shade or partial shade as a specimen plant or in a bed with penta, Cora vinca, angelonia, and/or baby’s breath. I will try the plant as a specimen in containers and in a shady bed in front of blue plumbago (another Texas Superstar!)

A third Texas Superstar that will be recognized this summer is the Basham’s Party Pink crape myrtle. It is a hybrid crape myrtle that has lavender- pink flowers and exfoliating bark.

Although it is just being recognized officially as a Texas Superstar in 2016, Basham’s has been performing as a superstar since 1965 when it was released by legendary plantsman Lynn Lowery as the first Texas hybrid crape myrtle.

Basham’s Party Pink grows to 30 feet tall and is the classic choice for gardeners looking for a relatively small blooming tree for full sun. It is drought tolerant and pest-free. The bark on mature Basham’s has a smooth bark that exfoliates in shallow plates to expose light tan, gray, and silver-gray bark highlighted with reddish brown undertones.

The Superstar evaluation noted that Basham’s and other crape myrtles have frozen back to the ground during severely cold years such as in 1989, but they are root hardy and most recovered enough that same growing season to bloom.