

More Plants for Summer Color

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Two weeks ago, we discussed esperanza, pride of Barbados, firebush, thyralis, and duranta, that were available in bloom at area nurseries that could be planted now for hot weather color. They were all semi-tropical plants that would freeze back to the ground in the San Antonio winter and then grow-back each Spring. There are more plants to consider for hot weather blooms that do not freeze back and others that are annual flowers.

The vitex (also called Texas lilac) is in bloom now and very noticeable. Most vitex are allowed to grow to full size, about 20 feet tall. If they are in full sun, they are covered with flower stalks with lavender blooms in early summer and then again in the fall. In addition to being attractive, the blooms offer a nectar source for hummingbirds, butterflies, and other pollinators.

There is a second way to manage vitex. Buy a plant now in full bloom, enjoy the blooms this summer and then trim off the seed pods as they begin to develop. The plant will produce more bloom. This winter prune it back to ground level. Next Spring it will grow again to about 6 feet tall and be covered with blooms. Managed in this way the plant can be dead headed to prevent seed production and encourage a second period of bloom. Vitex is not eaten by the deer and is pest-free with excellent drought tolerance. Some native plant advocates have identified vitex as an invasive exotic. I have not experienced any unwanted reproduction with my ancient vitex, but if there is some kind of threat from seed drop, the prune-back management strategy would greatly reduce any chance of seed production.

For gardeners interested in both an unusual plant and a plant very attractive to pollinators as a nectar source, consider the Porter weed. This tropical plant is available in several versions, but they all offer small clusters of blooms that move up their weeping shaped stems. My favorite selections are the dwarf red and the full-size purple. The colors of the blooms are livid but the mass of flowers available to view at any one time are small. You may ask, "why bother with a plant with such a limited display of blooms when so much other color is available for the summer"? The plants are well shaped, and the colors are intense, but the main appeal is the potency of the nectar. Include red, purple or other Porter weeds in your garden and you will have bees, butterflies and even hummingbirds competing for a place on the small blooms. It is the first time I have seen giant swallowtail butterflies and hummingbirds in aerial dogfights for a nectar source.

Porter weeds are cold-sensitive so don't expect them to come back after a cold winter. Grow most of the selections in full sun. The related Porter weeds have a long history of native medical uses that are described on the internet. We are not sure if Porter weed is eaten by the deer.

One summer color plant that we are sure is not eaten by the deer is vinca (also called periwinkle). This annual flower is available at area nurseries in white, red, pink, and lavender. Vinca was once the best-selling annual flower but its popularity declined because its severe susceptibility to the disease, aerial phytophthora. It got to the point that you could only use it from July to Thanksgiving. Now if you use the variety "Cora" it is back and resistant to aerial phytophthora. Use vinca in full sun. It will be blooming from the day you obtain a transplant from the nursery until cold weather arrives.

Vinca is the most drought tolerant annual flower. Grow it in full sun. There are upright and spreading forms of "Cora". Use it in containers or beds. Vinca does not attract pollinators as strongly as Porter weed but it is considered a good butterfly plant.