

Verbenas - The Tall and Short of It

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Verbenas have been on the garden scene for many years, being particularly important in England for bedding, and although not a major crop, hold their own in this country as well. The genus consists of over 200 species, so it should not be surprising that confusion about species exists. While the species are not particularly precocious, a good deal of hybridization has occurred. Most species are native to South America and the United States and a few have escaped from cultivation to beautify roadsides in the central and southern United States. The name verbenas comes from the ancient Latin name of the common European vervain, *V. officinalis*. These plants were reputed to have marvelous curative powers, even being ingested by such famous ancient story tellers as Virgil and Pliny. The flowers were also in demand as a restorative for defective vision.

In the greenhouse and landscape, garden verbenas is the most popular but basket types and perennial forms are rapidly gaining popularity. The hybrid or garden verbenas (*V. x hybrida*) has been embraced by seed companies for bedding plant use and resulted from crosses between *V. peruviana*, *V. incisa*, *V. phlogiflora*, and *V. platensis*. Without doubt, they have the most colorful and handsome flowers and seed availability insures their popularity. Seed of garden verbenas, however, has been notoriously frustrating to germinate. Significant differences in seed anatomy occur between cultivars and some will simply germinate more readily than others, regardless of environment. Selection of better germinating cultivars such as those in the Romance series and proper control of temperature and moisture in germinating chambers go a long way towards enhancing germination percentage. When growing from plugs, cover seeds lightly and provide germination temperatures of 75-80°F and 95% humidity for the first 2-3 days, then lower humidity to 75-80%. As seedlings emerge, 70-75°F should be maintained, then reduced in stages 3 and 4 of plug growth until temperatures of 65-68°F are maintained. Grow on in flats or pots at 60-62°F. If plugs are not used, a similar humidity and temperature program should be practiced for best results. Chilling the seed prior to planting seems to help a little, but results have been inconsistent. Many cultivars have been bred, including *Amour*, *Novalis*, *Romance*, *Sandy*, *Showtime*, and *Springtime* series. Individual colors have enjoyed great success, such as 'Peaches and Cream' and 'Trinidad.' However, even if the production problems were to magically disappear, resistance to garden verbenas is increasing in some areas of the country. Few cultivars tolerate the summer heat common in the central and southern areas of the country and often go to pieces by late June. Few landscapers select garden verbenas in those areas due to their poor overall landscape performance, therefore few homeowners find verbenas flourishing at malls and shopping centers as they do other bedding plants.

Another species starting to gain some respect is moss

verbenas (*V. tenuisecta*, *V. speciosa*), now being represented by the violet-blue flowers of 'Imagination,' an AAS and Fluorselect winner. Plants mature at about 12" tall and are useful in baskets but most often used as a sunny ground cover. Seed is available at approximately the same price per seed as garden verbenas, and generally germinates with fewer problems. I believe other colors will soon be on the market. Vegetative cuttings of white moss verbenas are being grown in some areas.

Trailing verbenas, propagated vegetatively, are becoming more popular as garden and basket items. These are generally selections of *V. peruviana* (small leaves, very prostrate, with pink or red flowers), *V. canadensis* (larger coarser leaves, long trailing shoots and purple to lavender flowers) or hybrids with different colored flowers. They are relatively easy to propagate from cuttings, although some selections such as 'Carrousel' and 'Pink Parfait' appear to be more susceptible to mildew and leaf spotting than others. Propagate under sweat chambers at 70-75°F and put 4 to 6 cuttings per 10" basket. Pinching will enhance the plant habit but is not necessary. Plants also may be produced as garden ground covers, but should be cut back after 2-3 weeks of growth. Some older and popular cultivars go under such imaginative names as 'Trailing Red,' 'Trailing Pink,' and 'Lavender.' Newer selections include 'Homestead Purple,' a vigorous deep purple cultivar, 'Carrousel,' a blue/white selection and 'Pink Parfait,' with pink/white flowers. Plants may be obtained from

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numerous sources and stock plants should not be maintained more than one year.

Two other species are on the sidelines for now but possess immense potential for growers. Both rigid verberna (*V. rigida*) and tall verberna (*V. bonariensis*) have mauve-lavender flowers on squarish stems, may be container grown and enjoy sunny locations in the landscape. Rigid verberna is an excellent plant for where colorful, trouble-free colonizers are needed. I had a call last spring from a fellow who wanted pounds of seed for a potential highway planting job but could not find any anywhere. I had the same response. 'Polaris' is a light lavender variety which appears to be more available than

the species. Both are aggressive and self-sow in the landscape.

Tall verberna can grow 4' high and is a tall version of rigid verberna. Although mainly grown from cuttings, seed can occasionally be found. Tall verberna is a very popular plant in the perennial plant business, however, few growers have yet to embrace it.

While the joys and virtues of verberna can be sung, one cannot ignore the white flies and mildew that can plague it, regardless of species or hybrid. Excellent soil drainage, good aeration, clean facilities and constant surveillance for the presence of fungal and flying pests must be practiced. Similarly, a well drained, sunny location should be selected in the landscape. Otherwise, a wretched mess will ensue, a terrible fate for such handsome plants.

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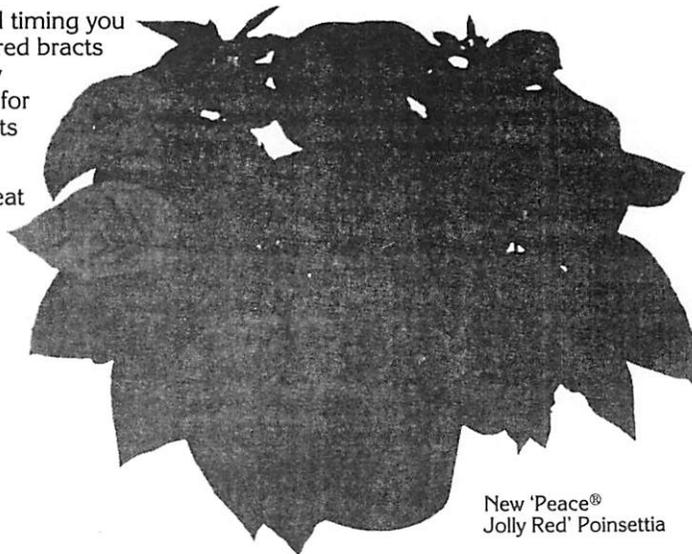
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