



# Garden Tip of the Week

March 3, 2010

## The Dynamic Dozen:

### *Unconventional Plant Selections for Your Container Gardens*

*By Matt Ross, TBG Horticulturist*

At Toledo Botanical Garden, the 2009 displays featured the integration of a wide range of plant material including red acre cabbage (*Brassica oleracea* 'Red Acre'), pink pilea (*Pilea macrophylla* 'Pink'), persian shield (*Strobilanthes dyerianus*), and coral berry (*Ardisia crenata*). After the success of these non-traditional plant selections, we are expanding our plant palette even more in 2010, with a wide range of plants that can be used in a multitude of ways to bring some excitement to your planters.

#### **Cutleaf Buckthorn (*Rhamnus frangula* "Fine Line®")**

Cutleaf buckthorn is the pinnacle plant for utilizing shrubs in a container. Its narrow shape especially Fine Line® have made it a popular choice for high-end commercial settings. It is becoming increasingly popular with homeowners looking to get a little bit of height in their containers without a massive price tag. The cutleaf buckthorn is easily adapts to a container environment and requires very little attention throughout the year. The delicate unfolding foliage and prominent vase shaped presence lends itself as the perfect backdrop for almost any plant combination. Last year a series of buckthorns were installed in planters at the front entrance of the manor house where they integrated well with tuberous begonias and black sweet potato vines.

Temperate Shrub

Zone Hardiness 2-7

Moderate Soil Moisture

Height up to 5' and width to 30" but easily maintained with pruning





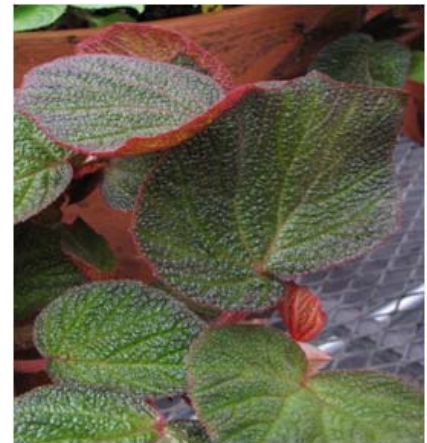
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## **Art Hodes Begonia (*Begonia* 'Art Hodes')**

A begonia with a little bite to it and a tough as nails mentality, is probably the best way to describe the Art Hodes selection of rhizomatous begonia. The textural allure of this plant outweighs its slightly annoying flowers. It makes an excellent addition to a variety of pots without requiring a baby-sitter to look good. The begonia responds extremely favorably to pruning and if desired the plant will trail, sprawl, or mound. If the soil in the container is too dry it will droop considerably but will rebound within hours of receiving an adequate drink. The reds, ambers, and golden browns which paint its leaves are best accented in a part sun situation and will quickly wash out if it is in a location receiving too much sunlight. Unlike several of the rex cultivars, the dynamic attributes of the foliage are best accented by other plant material rather than being a standalone masterpiece. I would recommend using coleus, iresine, any of the pilea selections, and colocasia in combinations with this plant.

Annual and Houseplant  
Part Sun to Shade  
Tolerant of Most Moisture Conditions



## **Purple Velvet/Love/Passion Vine (*Gynura aurantiaca*)**

Its hard not to fall in love with the genus *Gynura*. The elegant and vibrant foliage of the purple love, velvet, or passion vine lends itself to a variety of applications in container gardening. Although it does not make a great bedding plant like persian shield, the same bright purple coloration it provides is a must for a savvy gardener. The sprawling appendages of the straight purple or variegated selections will add a vibrant contrast with most other plant material; most notably the more versatile crassula and sedums as well as a wide assortment of salvias, pentas, and heliotrope. It loves the sun and can tolerate drought conditions. Be sure to find out why it is often referred to as the love vine this year.

Annual and Houseplant  
Full Sun to Part Sun  
Slightly Drier Soil Conditions





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## Foamflower (*Tiarella* sp.)

The epitome of the “temp perennial” program, the foamflower is a genus that has a lot to offer container garden enthusiast that may be discouraged by a lack of sunlight in their yard. Much like coral bells (*Heuchera* sp.) and caladiums (*Caladium* sp.), foamflowers are a prime example of how interesting foliage can bring a shade garden to life. Its traditional use as a perennial border plant or planted in mass as an accent along a river bank are only the tip of the iceberg for this little mounding perennial. In fact a cultivar new to the trade, ‘Happy Trails’ can be planted alone in a hanging basket, flowing over a pot, or integrated into a sculpted topiary. This delightful two-toned plant has soft green foliage accented by a chocolate center that is somewhat reminiscent of a Rorschach inkblot. Its irregular contrast and ability to integrate with a wide range of textural gems like coleus, coral bells, ferns, and MOSS make it a must for this year’s shade gardener. Don’t forget to check out its adorable flowers in the spring that enhance the display for about a 2-3 week period.

Herbaceous Perennial/ Temp Perennial  
Zones 4-9  
Shade  
Moist Soil Conditions



## Sweet Potato (*Ipomoea batatas*)

It’s not often that the straight species of a plant typically used for food production looks this majestic. A wide range of ornamental sweet potatoes have flooded the market in the last decade, becoming a staple in the greenhouse industry faster than many of its predecessors. The widely popular lime green, black, and variegated hybrids of *Ipomoea* have amazing foliage and an impressive trailing habit; however, the straight species sweet potato can be just as awe-inspiring. Although it is typically grown in our pioneer garden, the straight species sweet potato will be popping its head out of a significant quantity of our planters throughout the village this year. The beauty of its thick lustrous green foliage with purple/red new growth has already wowed volunteers noticing it in our Greenhouse. Not to mention, they will produce one of the sweetest potatoes in town. When you are looking for plants with a purpose look no further than the original sweet potato.

Annual Vegetable/ Root Crop  
Zones  
Full Sun  
Moderate Moisture





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## Henna Coleus (*Coleus* 'Henna')

In a world where unique foliage can make or break a selection and competition for introduction is high, a coleus just recently released in the commercial realm is quickly making a name for itself. The Henna coleus is becoming a favorite large coleus with growers and gardeners alike. When Jonathan Milbrodt and I went to the annual trails at C. Raker and Sons in Litchfield, MI last August; we viewed hundreds of new cultivars of Coleus. While there we ran in to Suzie Raker, Head of Programming for the company and asked her what her favorite plants were from the 2009 Trials. Without hesitation the first plant she mentioned was Henna Coleus. Its uniquely lobed foliage and unreal contrast of colors made it an instant obsession for Jonathan, myself, and self-proclaimed "Coleus Guru", Josue Altidor (TBG's Greenhouse Technician and IPM Specialist). Don't be surprised to find quite a few of these gems in the shade garden and scattered throughout our planter this next year.



Annual for Containers and Bedding  
Shade to Part Sun  
Prefers Moist, Well Drained Soils

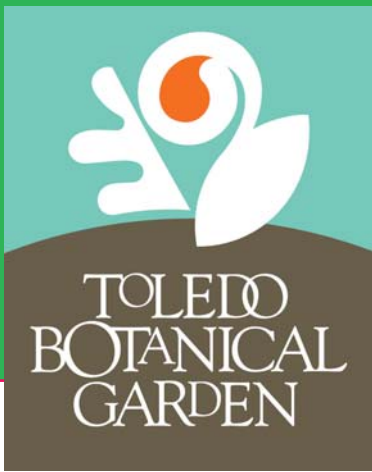
## Copperleaf and chenille plant (*Acalypha* sp.)

The *Acalypha* genus has over 450 species with a variety of uniquely plants with and oddball fuzzy flowers. Many gardeners that were exposed to its most notable species chenille plant, have vivid memories of playing with "red caterpillars" as a child on cascading foliage that made it a popular addition to conservatories for decades. In addition to the fuzzy red flowers of chenille plant, the upright darker foliage of the copperleaf plants have a wide range of interest. They will grow into a large shrub or small tropical tree if overwintered for several years and are a dramatic insert into container gardens of all sizes. Their ability to withstand shady conditions and slightly drier soils allow them to thrive in areas where most shade plants do not. They are a great accent when planted with hostas or other broadleaved foliage plants in shade containers. They also make a unique centerpiece when used with coleus and its perfect complement the Art Hodes begonia previously described.



Annual and Houseplant  
Shade to Part Sun  
Dry to Moist Soil Conditions





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*March 3, 2010*

## **Bloodleaf (*Iresine* sp.)**

*Iresine* is a tropical American genera very similar to *Alternanthera*, but with additional options in height. They have been popular container plant in zoos and aquariums looking for an exotic plant that doesn't require a whole lot of attention. One of the most popular selections is Chicken Gizzard. It's funny name and amazing netted foliage make it a an entertaining conversation piece and focal point in your containers. Purple Lady was a popular bedding plant for us last year when we mixed it with Dapple Apple coleus (*Coleus* 'Dapple Apple') and pink pilea (*Pilea macrophylla* 'Pink') alongside the glass blowers building. Despite the instant addition of color that it provided by its vibrant purple stems and foliage, the plant seems to do best in a containerized environment, where it can reach heights of 30" in a single season.



True annual  
Part Sun to Part Shade  
Moisture Tolerant

## **Jungle Gold Impatiens (*Impatiens auricomma* 'Jungle Gold')**

If you know me, then you know I am not the biggest fan of impatiens. Struggles with adequate moisture, fertility, and the inability to thrive in less than optimal climatic conditions have ruined my perception of one of America's most dominant bedding plants. Fortunately, there is an impatiens that I have learned to admire over the last season. Jungle Gold Impatiens exceeded my expectations in a season riddled with damp cool conditions as a bedding plant in 2009. It has the appeal of its genetic ancestor the jewelweed (*Impatiens pallida*) and has a striking yellow color not often associated the traditional bedding plants (*Impatiens walleriana*). It integrates well with a variety of ferns, coral bells, foamflower, and ornamental sweet potato vines and is in high demand for 2010. Ball Seed is not carrying large quantities of the plant at the current moment so if you find a supplier go for gold.



True Annual One Year  
Shade  
Moist Soil Conditions



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## **Emerald Lace Swedish Ivy (*Plectranthus* 'Emerald Lace')**

The Emerald Lace Swedish ivy is a newer cultivar of a series of houseplants turned bedding plants from the genus *Plectranthus*. Its delicate netting mixed with purple and green foliage is the perfect accent for planters in a moderately shady environment. They work very well with a variety of begonias and gracefully drape over the pots edge much like the more well-known variegated Swedish ivy that you may have used in the past. The white bloom is slightly insignificant but does add a little variety and contrast to the striking foliage. With a lot to offer for a small plant, this Swedish ivy has a lot to offer inside and outdoors.

Annual Plant that can be converted into a houseplant  
Part Sun to Dappled Shade  
Moisture Tolerant



## **Velvet Flower Tree (*Stewartia* sp.)**

This tree is a favorite of plant enthusiast world-wide and a selection for the top ten of the TBG 2010 plant sale. Although there are several little known American species of *Stewartia*, the Asiatic trio of *rostrata*, *serrata*, and most notable *pseudocamellia* are amazing trees that will work in a variety of situations. Last year two, seven-foot specimens greeted guest at TBG's Crosby Art Festival in combination with globe amaranth (*Gomphrena globosa*), Moonbeam coreopsis (*Coreopsis verticillata* 'Moonbeam'), May Night salvia (*Salvia x sylvestris* 'May Night'), and Black-Hearted ornamental sweet potato vine (*Ipomoea batatas* 'Black Heart'). The velvet textured, white flowers drew awe from audiences during late June and into July and their brilliant red/purple fall color accented the Artist Village for weeks. At the end of the season this temperate tree can either be brought into a poly-hut or can be planted in your own home garden. Be careful to ensure that no air pockets exist around the planting and that there is sufficient mulch or buffer between the rootball and the atmosphere to prevent winter desiccation. Stewartias are considered to be the most ornamental tree and make a majestic accent to to a large container.

Temperate Tree  
Zone Hardiness  
Full sun to Filtered Shade  
Moderate Moisture





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## **Red False Banana (*Ensete ventricosum*)**

If you are looking for a tropical with an intense color display look no further than an *Ensete*. This arboreal plant genera has a long stalk that elevates the nearly 4' long leaves above the soil surface creating a majestic canopy of color. The dark purple and red tones towards the outer edges of its leaves are highlighted by lime and light green midribs that suggest the color is too perfect to be real. It requires good drainage and a medium sized plant can grow upwards of four to five feet in a single season so plan your planter accordingly. Although the *Ensete* looks and acts just like the dominant banana genus *Musa* its fruit are a little different than expected. The false banana is traditionally grown for its vibrant foliage and arching habit of its leaves rather than the flavor of its fruit. Specimens can be purchased in a variety of sizes although it will be an ongoing project to start it from seed. False bananas will be a versatile addition to a sunroom or solarium during the winter months.

Tropical Tree  
Zone 9b to 11  
Full Sun to Part Sun  
Moderate Moisture with Good Drainage

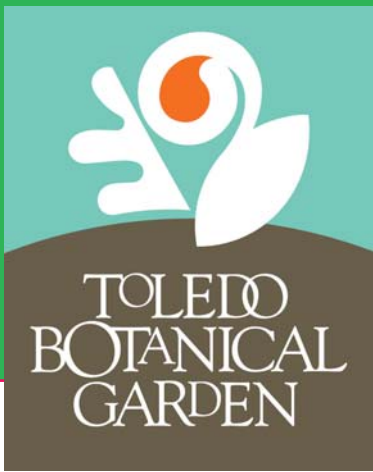


## **Sunjoy™ Gold Pillar Barberrry (*Berberis thunbergii* 'Talago')**

With as many amazing plants there are which can be included into containers I had to make this list a baker's dozen, with the Golden Pillar Barberrry. Don't worry about the thorns, because this little gem is one of the better barberries out there. It has a strong upright form and delicate flower. It mixes very well with purple heart vine (*Tradescantia pallida*) and purple love vine (*Gynura aurantiaca*) for a stark contrast and if you desire a softer touch use it with the blue and purple hues of annual beard tongue (*Penstemon x hybrida*) and Lisianthus (*Eustoma grandiflorum*). Make sure to continue to use this plant in a pot for years to come as its size will lend it to acting as a focal point up to 38" tall

Temperate Shrub  
Zones 4-9  
Full Sun Preferred  
Moisture Tolerant





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Before bringing a plant that spent the majority of the season outdoors into your own home make sure that there are no insects present and that the soil is sterilized using either a hydrogen peroxide mix or other sterilant. It is also recommended to re-apply a systemic insecticide like Merit if the initial application occurred 6 or more months prior to prevent insect infestation. Oftentimes fungus gnats and whiteflies piggyback their way into your home when experimenting with plants transitioning into your “home-scaping”. Please be careful during the transition because the last thing you would want to do is introduce a potentially damaging threat while trying to preserve the life of a new container favorite.