

Perennial Passion

Fifteen years ago it was a chore to find more than one hundred perennials in the local garden centre; our choices at the time were the stable, droll reliable plants of our ancestors; grandmothers' favourite hollyhock or Aunt Betty's favourite Peony. In fact, many plants sold were never given a cultivar name; a tag told us it was a Pink Double Peony or Mix Coloured Hollyhocks. This was sufficient for inclusion in our gardens; in essence we were not very discerning or adventurous gardeners.



Primula 'Francesca'

We are no longer interested in planting Aunt Betty's Peony and are now becoming a nation of gardeners demanding and expecting much more from our local garden center. Canadian gardeners have developed insatiable appetites for the latest plants from Europe or the newest varieties and cultivars stabled in the large west coast nurseries. This evolution of the gardener is natural; since time, immemorial gardeners have collected and grown the unusual and unique, we just seem to go through plateaus of gardening hesitation, hence Aunt Betty's Peony. Nowadays, however if we see that new Francesca Primrose (*Primula 'Francesca'*) grown in someone else's garden then we expect to be able to buy it at the local garden center, even though in 'Francesca's' case it is an uninteresting dull green flower. This appetite for the 'avant garde' is often driven by gardening pioneers such as London's own Louise Weeks, who introduced this author to one of the featured plants in this column, *Begonia grandis*. Such individuals are almost solely responsible for the upsurge in new plants appearing in local gardens. On the commercial side it takes the entrepreneurs to get these plants into the market place. One of Ontario's largest perennials growers who supply many of the local garden centers, Janet Anderson Perennials now lists over

300 new perennials this year; this is in addition to their regular fifteen hundred offerings.

Although not new, for in fact there are few species of plants that are, they may have once been cultivated elsewhere or planted by past generations but long forgotten. I have listed four of the more unusual but easily grown plants. I could add to this list daily as I discover and grow 'new' plants but alas once again I am limited by the editor's pen.

Begonia's typically grown as bedding plants are not hardy here, after all we live in Canada, with cold winters and frosts that penetrate the ground to almost 4'. Or so I thought until I visited Louise Weeks, who lives on Riverside Drive in London. Growing in a shaded portion of the garden was a large leaf *Begonia* in full flower. Realizing Louise was a true perennial connoisseur I asked what she was doing with this striking, albeit common annual. It's perennial she replied and I knew that instance I had to have it. The Large Leaved *Begonia*, *Begonia grandis* has been growing in my own garden for over ten years, in moist shade it thrives and supplants a tropical atmosphere to that particular part of the landscape. It is late to emerge in the spring, and I wonder every spring if the past winter has 'done it in' but by late May, on the shaded north side of the house, it emerges. By late summer it is in full bloom. Occasionally it has given birth and the new seedlings are passed on to true gardening connoisseurs, as Louise did with me.



Begonia grandis leaves

Pulmonarias commonly go by the horrible name Lungworts, their name is a strong case for us to learn Latin and I think that from this point forward we should all call them *Pulmonarias*, even though this name still has a connection to the lung. This species of plant has been around for well over a hundred years but has sat in the background until recently. If any plant 'has it all the time' this is it. Attractive flowers ranging from blue to white and pink and variegated foliage in degrees of silver and green, again depending on the cultivars grown. It thrives in average garden soil in full sun to partial shade, providing it receives adequate moisture. In some of the more vigorous species it can form large mats of ground cover almost impenetrable to weeds. Its durability of foliage and welcoming spring flowers have regained its prominence in the most refined gardens, and as with the 'new' plants this will be planted 'en masse' in the connoisseurs garden once again.

I was never impressed with Bugbane (*Bruner macrophylla*) until I came across this recent introduction, *B. macrophylla* 'Jack Frost'. Given the right conditions this gem will illuminate the darkest spot in the garden with its frost patina leaves. Sapphire flowers held above the foliage in spring are an added bonus, personified against the backdrop of silver tinted leaves. Try this plant in groupings of three or more in partially shaded areas of the garden with soil that will hold sufficient moisture against the summer drought.



Bruner macrophylla 'Jack Frost'

Combined with one of the few shade loving grasses, Northern Sea Oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*), its long pendulous branches and lime green colour are a perfect contrast to the bold 'Jack Frost' foliage and is sure to demonstrate to one and all your trendy knowledge of the current 'in' plants.



Pulmonarias, commonly known as Lungworts

Huskers Red Penstemon (*Penstemon digitalis* 'Huskers Red') came onto the gardening stage several years ago to great fanfare. I was never very fond of Penstemon; these North American Natives always seem to behave badly in the garden flopping around like some itinerant drunk. Of course there are exceptions; there are well behaved dwarf forms and of course 'Huskers Red'. Huskers Red Penstemon, like all good plants in my books, firstly has good form, it grows to a height of about 2' and stands without support. Foliage in full sun, a must, is intense red in spring and fading to a dull purple in summer. This fading foliage is a needed foil to the shocking pink blooms resembling foxglove that are to follow in mid summer. Well drained, fertile soil is needed to produce a strong clump, given a hair cut after flowering; the foliage will contribute to the garden tapestry for most of the season.

There are books of trendy plants, my notebook as I read the glossy gardening magazines get thicker every year. I write the names down in the hope of finding that unusual gem, reality often strikes and I realize that my garden is not big enough to accommodate them all, neither is my budget. I am faced with the dilemma of what to get rid of to squeeze in one more choice plant. Does anybody want a Francesca Primrose?