

COLORADO green

Official publication of ALCC serving the green industry in the Rocky Mountain region

Plant Select turns 25 Black Forest thrives on DIY clients WHS preps students for industry



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Redefining the WESTERN LANDSCAPE



Photo courtesy Dan Johnson

SUNSET HYSSOP
Agastache rupestris



Photo courtesy David Winger

HOT WINGS® TATARIAN MAPLE
Acer tataricum

Plant Select® turns 25

BY ANN KENDALL

The year 2002, didn't feel like a "normal" drought year in Colorado. Tree leaves wilted on branches, as trees succumbed to stress. Flower gardens shriveled in the heat. In many areas, bluegrass lawns, which typically go dormant in the summer, dried up beyond a point of return. Municipalities declared water emergencies, some going as far as to limit watering to no more than two hours per week.

In the early 2000s, nearly all of Colorado faced severe or extreme drought conditions. In 2002, for example, much of the Front Range received less than 8 inches of annual moisture—a significant drop from average

precipitation of about 14-16 inches. With gardening essentially banned, jobs in the green industry dried up too, leaving hundreds without work.


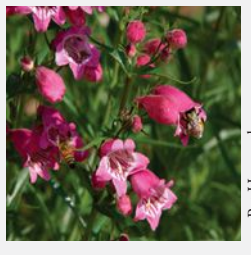



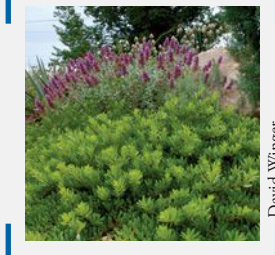
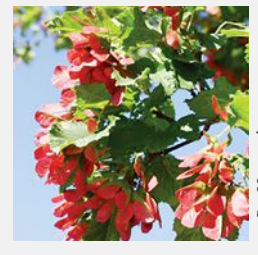
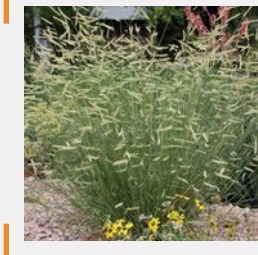
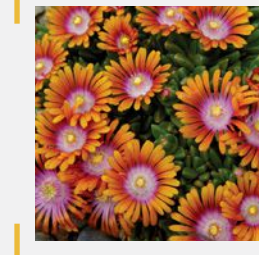
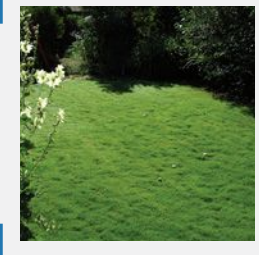
At the time, Plant Select, a plant introduction program that shares smart, new plant choices inspired by the Rocky Mountain region, was still in its infancy. Plant Select is a nonprofit collaboration between Colorado State University (CSU), Denver Botanic Gardens (DBG) and the western horticulture industry. Even in those early days of the 2000s, the program had already proven that it's possible to have a beautiful, low-water garden with plants that don't need to be on life support.



MILESTONE INTRODUCTIONS



By Ann Kendall and Ross Shrigley

<p>1997</p>  <p>Dan Johnson</p>	<p>1999</p>  <p>Pat Hayward</p>  <p>Pat Hayward</p>	<p>2005</p>  <p>Panayoto Kelaidis</p>  <p>John Seebrook</p>	<p>2006</p>  <p>David Winger</p>	<p>2007</p>  <p>Pat Hayward</p>	<p>2011</p>  <p>Carla Tew</p>	<p>2012</p>  <p>David Winger</p>	<p>2016</p>  <p>Kelly Grummons</p>
<p>SUNSET HYSSOP <i>Agastache rupestris</i></p> <p>This North American native is the <i>Agastache</i> that started them all. <i>Agastache rupestris</i> hadn't been available in garden centers before Sunset Hyssop. (Previous hyssops—<i>Agastache foeniculum</i>—had been sold as herbs.) Now, dozens of <i>Agastache rupestris</i> and other Southwestern varieties are available across the country. (Zones 4b-10)</p>	<p>RED ROCKS® PENSTEMON <i>Penstemon x mexicali</i> 'Poo8S'</p> <p>AND</p> <p>PIKES PEAK PURPLE® PENSTEMON <i>Penstemon x mexicali</i> 'Poo7S'</p> <p>Mexicali penstemons are hybrids of the wild, native American species and the Mexican species. These introductions extend the blooming season of the genus. Plus, they're more tolerant of watering regimes. (Zones 4b-8)</p>	<p>WILD THING SAGE <i>Salvia greggii</i></p> <p>AND</p> <p>FURMAN'S RED SAGE <i>Salvia greggii</i> 'Furman's Red'</p> <p>In the past, drought-tolerant <i>Salvia greggii</i> hadn't been considered as a garden plant in Colorado. Traditionally, garden salvias were non-native annuals. But in the right soil and location, <i>Salvia greggii</i> can thrive in Colorado. Furman's Red is slightly hardier. (Zones 5b-10)</p>	<p>MOCK BEARBERRY MANZANITA <i>Arctostaphylos x coloradensis</i></p> <p>A Colorado native, Mock Bearberry Manzanita offered a drought-tolerant, evergreen solution for winter beauty—and a stark contrast to many moisture-loving shrubs that suffer desiccation in western winters. Panchito, Plant Select's most popular <i>Arctostaphylos</i>, was introduced in 2006. (Zone 4b-8)</p>	<p>HOT WINGS® TATARIAN MAPLE <i>Acer tataricum</i> 'GarAnn' PP 15,023</p> <p>Small in stature but big in impact, this maple offers an exciting alternative to Eastern maples, which become chlorotic in Colorado soils and struggle in fluctuating temperatures. Known for its scarlet-red samaras, HOT WINGS® tolerates alkaline soils and is more cold hardy. (Zones 4-10)</p>	<p>BLONDE AMBITION BLUE GRAMA GRASS <i>Bouteloua gracilis</i> 'Blonde Ambition'</p> <p>A North American native, Blonde Ambition brought Plant Select to the national plant scene. It's a patented plant, so every propagator growing it has to be licensed. Blonde Ambition is consistently Plant Select's top selling plant. (Zones 4-9)</p>	<p>FIRE SPINNER® <i>Delosperma</i> 'Poo1S'</p> <p>When Plant Select introduced new varieties of <i>Delosperma</i> in the late 1990s, this genus was still very unusual. Today, Plant Select may be best known for its vibrant, elevation-hardy ice plants from the 2010s: FIRE SPINNER®, Alan's Apricot and GRANITA® Raspberry. (Zones 5-10)</p>	<p>DOG TUFF™ Grass <i>Cynodon</i> 'PWINo4S'</p> <p>In the 2010s, Plant Select had enough unique plants for the entire landscape—not just the garden. In 2016, the program introduced DOG TUFF™ grass, a xeric, turf substitute for high traffic areas. This warm season grass can even tolerate dog use. It's Plant Select's second-highest selling plant. (Zones 5-10)</p>

25 years on

Now, as Plant Select reaches its 25th anniversary, the program has become a form of drought insurance for the Colorado green industry and the broader West. It has introduced more than 170 water-wise trees, shrubs, turf alternatives, herbaceous perennials and annuals. Just as important, it's redefining how the public thinks about the western landscape—often behind the scenes.

"Plant Select has invented a unique style and whole, new categories of plants—like

Agastaches [hyssops], *Delosperma* [ice plants] and cold-hardy *Salvia greggii* [western salvias]," shares Panayoti Kelaidis, director of outreach and senior curator at DBG.

This new western style embraces the region's native landscape and flora, as well as its demanding climate. It shows that, yes, it is possible to have a garden that's in harmony with the natural environment.

"Our gardens no longer have to be a glaring contrast to the western environment

in which we live," Kelaidis adds. "This program's plants are teaching people to return to their native landscapes. We're rewilding our cities, so our landscapes are more like the nature we've displaced.

Taking root in the "perennial boom"

Plant Select isn't your typical plant introduction organization. (Another year, another heuchera!) Rather, it strives for unusual plants. It prides itself on being creative. And it often

We're rewilding our cities, so our landscapes are more like the nature we've displaced.

Panayoti Kelaidis

serves as the research and development arm of the local horticulture industry.

It can trace its roots back to the "perennial boom" of the early 1980s. Baby boomers began investing in perennials for their home landscapes. Initially though, the western plant palette consisted of perennials that had been developed in humid climates. Colorado landscapes had a midwestern or east coast style, and people didn't know they could conserve water through their plant choices.

At the time, CSU, led by professor and horticulturist Jim Klett Ph.D., and DBG began bringing in and developing hundreds of new, herbaceous plants that could thrive in our challenging climate in the Rocky Mountain region.

These unique plants weren't known to the public yet. As Klett explains, there was a feeling that getting these plants to market "ought to be a joint effort" with the local horticulture industry. Western growers had knowledge to share and wanted to be included.

In the 1990s, nursery growers were invited to the table, so everyone could have access to these exciting, new plants.

A common cause

In that first decade after Plant Select's founding in 1997, there was no office. Meetings were held in a "dark basement" at DBG that included competing nursery growers, as well as plant propagators and researchers from CSU and DBG, like Kelaidis and horticulturist Mike Bone.

"There was no competition, just common cause," reflects Pat Hayward, who became the first executive director of Plant Select in 2008. "People came together to share what was working for them, as well as problems and challenges."

All wanted the same outcome—plants that thrive in the tough growing environments of the high plains and intermountain regions of Colorado.

Klett believes Plant Select is unique in its three-way partnership between CSU, DBG and the local green industry. "Many organizations have a two-way cooperative agreement. Our program has been much more successful, in my opinion, because of that three-way approach."

Plant Select also has become a showcase for regional talent—western horticulturists and hybridizers who've devoted their lives to plants, like David Salman, Lauren Springer, Kelly Grummons and others. Many Plant Select introductions have come from these innovators, helping to put the Rocky Mountain region on the map for horticulture around the world.

Champion for pollinators

Plant Select has encouraged pollinators since its earliest introductions. With populations of birds and insects at risk, the program has made a conscious effort to introduce plants that provide food sources or refuge for pollinators, like hummingbirds.

People came together to share what was working for them, as well as problems and challenges.

Pat Hayward

Kelaidis believes that Plant Select has played a significant role in increasing the number of hummingbirds that spend the summer in the Front Range of Colorado with its "banquet" of hummingbird flowers. According to Kelaidis, in the not-so-distant past, hummingbirds were typically seen in May and September only. Now hummingbirds are present for the whole summer.

Of course, no conversation of pollinators is complete without discussing the native plants that attract them. Despite a growing interest in natives, there are very few plant introduction programs in the West that have been able to get native herbaceous perennials and shrubs into garden centers. Part of the challenge is how difficult these plants are to propagate. CSU is currently doing research on how to improve success rates.

Despite the obstacles, nearly 50% of Plant Select's plants are native to North America—81 plants total—with the majority being native to high plains or montane regions.

Plant Select's other plants are from sister climates that share the Rocky Mountain region's steppe environment and challenges.

Looking to the future

Looking ahead, Ross Shrigley, the Plant Select executive director, notes that the program is thinking holistically about landscapes—adding to its collection of large trees, turf replacements, native shrubs and perennials. Plant Select needs more propagators to keep up with demand and is working to involve more.

Shrigley believes that Plant Select will continue to be "a gateway program" to introduce people to unique plants and feed their interest in plant diversity.

As others try to duplicate Plant Select's success, the question is, how easy will that be? While we pause to recognize Plant Select's 25

years, it's worth musing that it's the people and their passion that are the key. | **CG**



Ann Kendall is a western garden writer and blogger, and a Certified Colorado Gardener. Her favorite perennial is Plant Select's Red Birds in a Tree (*Scrophularia macrantha*).

PLANT SELECT BY THE NUMBERS

1997
Year founded

172
Total number of plants

81
Natives to North America

5-8
Typical new plant introductions per year

1,000+
Members and volunteers who've contributed to Plant Select's success

11,516,099
Total plants sold in the last 5 years



2
Books published

68
Plant Select demonstration gardens

104
Licensed propagators

67
Licensed garden retailers