

Classics: 4 flowers and a tomato



IRENE VIRAG

From music to movies, football to fairy tales and art to automobiles, every aspect of life has its classics. Things that stand the test of time to become cultural treasures. Beethoven's Fifth, "Gone With the Wind," Cinderella, Ford Mustang (the original), "To Kill a Mockingbird," "Mona Lisa," "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," "Hey Jude" — you get the idea. So why not flower and vegetable seeds?

As far as I'm concerned, the time has come for a list of all-time annuals. So I'm happy to tell you that All-America Selections, a consortium of U.S. seed growers, has obliged.

This year, the Illinois-based organization is celebrating its 75th anniversary and, in honor of the occasion, it not only selected its yearly winners but went a step further. For the first time in its history, the group announced five All America Classics.

The inductees into this horticultural hall of fame are two petunia varieties, a dianthus, a giant pansy and a big red tomato. If you've grown any of them, you have reason to glow. The people responsible for their propagation and production are already cheering.

I'll start the lineup with Big Beef, an early maturing beefsteak tomato. This Big Beef is nothing to complain about. "It's one in a million," says Dan Croker, regional sales manager for Seminis Vegetable Seeds, which put the eight-to-12-ounce tomato on the market 12 years ago. "The only complaint I've ever heard is that you have to tie up the vines really well because the fruit is so big." Along with flavor, Big Beef's virtues include resistance to verticillium, fusarium, nematode, tobacco mosaic virus and other diseases.

It adds to his luster that Big Beef was hybridized by the late Colen Wyatt, who also thought small and created Husky Gold, a highly regarded cherry tomato. In all, he bred more than 50 varieties of vegetables. "We named a pumpkin after him," Dan told me. "Wyatt's Wonder, a great big, 100-pounder."

I've always been fascinated by plant breeders, whom I think of as artist-scientists possessed of infinite patience. "Most breeders are, well, a different breed," Dan said in a phone interview. "They're quirky. It was often difficult for Colen to explain his ideas in words. But once you hashed out a concept — within three years he'd come



Two of the All America Classics: Big Beef tomato, top, and Majestic Giants Mix pansies



Celosia Fresh Look Gold

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up with what you asked for. Colen expressed himself in his plants."

Wave Purple, a disease-resistant, 4- to 6-inch-tall flower that spreads like a ground cover, has an equally interesting background. During All-America Selections trials, the names of breeders are kept secret. All the well-known petunia breeders were sure one of their group had developed the striking violet ground cover. But, as it turned out, the man they would raise a glass to worked for a beer company — Kirin Brewery of Japan.

This is not as surprising as you might think. Beer companies need plant breeders to produce better barley and hops. Japanese firms give their horticulturists time to work on personal projects. And Daigaku Takeshita of Kirin got to work crossing hybrid petunias with wild species, creating new male and female lines, selecting and breeding the progeny and eventually coming up with a winner in Wave Purple.

"He's a humble fellow and extremely proud of this honor," Ben Walraven, worldwide sales director of PanAmerican Seed in Chicago told me by phone. PanAmerican, which has been breeding petunias for half a century, took over producing and marketing Wave Purple everywhere in the world except Japan. Now there are six varieties in the Wave family and three other petunia series under the "Ride the Wave" banner. Daigaku is still with Kirin, busy hybridizing petunias as well as vinca and primula.

PanAmerican also markets Ideal Violet, the dianthus honored as a classic. The appropriately named bloom, which debuted 15 years ago, tolerates both heat and cold. This seems logical since it was developed in the South of France, where winter can be very cold and summer very hot. Ideal Violet is

exactly that, both in containers and the garden. It thrives from spring through summer with delicate violet flowers, grows up to 12 inches tall and branches a foot wide.

The other petunia in the classic mix is Ultra Crimson Star — which won the annual award in 1988. It boldly lives up to its name with a white star pattern on 3- to 4-inch crimson flowers. All that and it's an early bloomer you don't have to pinch or cut back. It just keeps showing off. It was bred by Mathilde "Tilly" Holtrop of Goldsmith Seeds, who also created another All-America Selections winner — the miniature petunia Fantasy Pink Morn.

The fifth honoree is a bunch of familiar faces that have been smiling at gardeners since 1966, when the plant was developed by Sukeo Miyazaki of the Sakata Seed Corp., who is now retired. The bouquet goes to Majestic Giants Mix, those vivid pansies with the traditional cat's faces on 4-inch blooms.

"Majestic Giants is the Kleenex of the garden world," John Nelson, director of sales and marketing for Sakata, told me when I called him. "When you say the word 'tissue,' everyone thinks Kleenex — they're synonymous. When you say the word 'pansy' you think Majestic Giants."

John's pride is pardonable and, like he says, "It's really something to set an industry standard and maintain it for 40 years." And the old bunch has outstanding attributes even beyond size and color — the mix does just fine in spring or fall as well as in sun or shade.

So there you have it. Four flowers and a big tomato that will stand out in your field and mine. They've stood the test of time.

They're truly classics.

Annuals to pick in 2007

As it announced its all-time classics, All-America Selections also picked its 2007 crop of top annuals. The winners:

Pepper Holy Molé: Disease-resistant plants produce 8-inch-long green peppers that mature into a yummy shade of chocolate. Within 85 days of planting seedlings, you'll be harvesting the tangy fruit for its true purpose — sweet-spicy molé sauce.

Petunia Opera Supreme Pink Morn: Big, shimmering pink flowers on trailing stems create carpets of color that don't need deadheading and make a statement cascading from containers or spilling

down slopes. It takes 90 to 110 days for seeds to blossom into plants that spread 3 to 4 feet.

Vinca Pacifica Burgundy Halo: Velvety burgundy blooms with large white centers and heat and drought tolerance make this vinca a winner. It grows a foot high and wide and takes 60 days to flower.

Celosia Fresh Look Gold: This celosia looks fresh all summer. Its 3- to 4-inch-tall golden plumes don't stand up to heat, humidity and rain. Seeds take about 110 days to flower.

Visit all-americanselections.org for seed companies and local retailers offering 2007 winners. — IRENE VIRAG