

The hunt for the 1 best heucheras

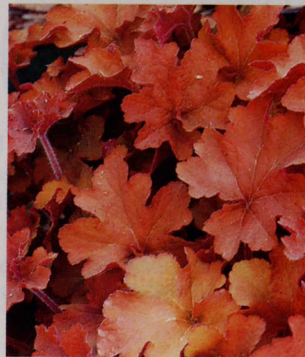
Among the infinite options, each color group has its true performers

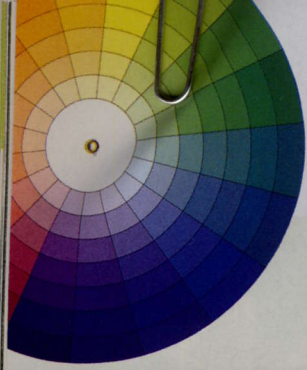
by Allan Armitage

My daughter Heather is a young mother balancing children, a job, a house, and a husband—usually in that order. Given her hectic schedule, she has neither the time nor the inclination to spend a lot of time shopping for plants.

Heather called me recently and said that she needed a suggestion for shady container plants that would be colorful and require little maintenance. I was ecstatic because the only time Heather would purchase plants was when my wallet and I visited, and here she was seeking advice without money attached. I didn't ask any questions but went on the offensive. I told her that she should go to her local nursery and ask the staff for a plant called heuchera, otherwise known as coral bells (*Heuchera* spp. and cvs., USDA Hardiness Zones 3–8). Heucheras are low maintenance, provide colorful foliage and occasionally beautiful flowers, and, best of all, not only tolerate shade but also thrive in it.

I then asked the most important question: "Heather, are you taking the kids to the garden center?" Ever since their





Exploring the heuchera color wheel

One of the consistent trends in gardening over the past 30 years is the desire for color, which usually comes in the form of brightly hued flowers. But in the shade, color can be hard to come by. Shade-loving heucheras provide that punch of color through an array of extraordinary foliage.



'Obsidian'

Dark purple

The trend toward purple foliage has been building for years. Almost every group of plants has a purple-leaved member, from salvias to elephant's ears. There is purple and then there is dark purple, which at times appears to be almost black. **'Obsidian'** is a heuchera with shiny, almost-black foliage. One of the finest of the dark-leaved forms I have seen, it holds the dark color well into summer. Not quite as shiny or dark, **'Mocha'** makes a good selection, as well, thanks to its vigor and longevity.



'Lime Rickey'

Lime green to yellow



'Citronelle'

This color range is like a magnet to the eyes. Flowers are secondary and, in fact, can detract from the foliage. The leaves can be sensitive to sunburn, so afternoon shade is a must, particularly in the South.

The smooth foliage of **'Citronelle'** is as bright as a beacon. In an informal poll, this cultivar was voted the number one heuchera in our collection at the University of Georgia trial gardens. White flowers appear in late summer. **'Lime Rickey'** is a greener option with wonderfully vivid leaves, which become more ruffled as they mature. Its white flowers are pretty nondescript.



Silver with dark markings

'Silver Scrolls'

Plants with a good deal of silver hue on their foliage were common when the heuchera explosion began several years ago. In general, the leaves have darker veins, which contrast with the rest of the leaf.

'Silver Scrolls' is subtly stunning, with leaves that have an outstanding silver quality in spring. As the summer heats up, the foliage remains handsome, unlike some other so-called silver cultivars. Nice white flowers appear in spring. Although **'Regina'**, another good option, never receives much attention, its silvery leaves have rich venation and pink to burgundy flowers.



Peppermint Spice'

Green with silver markings

Green is a color often overlooked in the heuchera world. Although many breeders tend to concentrate on more colorful foliage, there are a few standouts in this category that should not be ignored. The leaves of 'Peppermint Spice' are green with silver markings, its vigor is terrific, and its persistence in the garden is outstanding—and unlike its cousin 'Green Spice', this beauty has outstanding rose-red flowers.

HEUCHERAS AT A GLANCE

Know your zone: Most heucheras are hardy from Zones 3 to 8; however, some (e.g., 'Brownies', 'Citronelle', 'Caramel', 'Frosted Violet', and 'Mocha') may struggle in zones colder than Zone 5.

Site them properly: Most heucheras enjoy full sun to partial shade and moist, well-drained soil. Under the right conditions, they will grow 1 to 3 feet tall and wide.

Watch out for the stalk: The root stalk tends to grow upward, so mulch annually to keep it covered. You may occasionally need to lift out the entire plant and replant it with the crown just above the soil.

Don't fret frost heave: Plants may push themselves out of the soil at times due to freezing and thawing. Either in late fall or very early spring, mound soil or compost around any exposed roots. The plants will recover well and grow on without a problem.

Give them the right amount of light: All heucheras tolerate shade,

but that is not to say they perform well buried under an oak canopy. Except for the chartreuse forms, they tolerate a lot more sun than most people give them credit for. Not a single plant—not even the chartreuse ones—will have trouble with morning sun. Protection from afternoon sun, however, is a good idea, particularly in the South.

Problems are few: Heucheras occasionally have issues with foliar nematodes, rust, powdery mildew, and leaf spots. The best way to avoid these pests and diseases is to site your heuchera properly because stress can trigger these ailments.

Look for native parents: Some new hybrid cultivars (e.g., 'Brownies', 'Citronelle', 'Frosted Violet', and 'Mocha') have the southeastern native *H. villosa* in their parentage and tend to be more heat tolerant, thriving in warmer climates. These selections also have larger, heart-shaped leaves and are known for their vigorous growth habits.

last visit—when the tomato cages were knocked into the fountain and the birdbaths, along with neighboring roses, were toppled—Heather and her active entourage were a little less welcome. When she replied that she was alone on this mission, I knew the staff would show her the plants and all would be well.

Like a teenager waiting for a date, I sat by the phone. When it rang, I immediately asked Heather what heuchera she had purchased. "There were so many, I couldn't make up my mind. So I didn't buy any," she finally admitted.

I was crushed, but I understood. I, too, have had the same stress when my wife told me to go buy toilet tissue. I was astounded. For something so simple, how could there be so many choices? The only difference between the choice I made and Heather's was that my purchase was necessary. Therein lies the rub with American retailing. In our zeal to be all things for all people, we confuse volume with quality.

Plant breeders long ago discovered how to "unlock the code" of heucheras, and since then, more cultivars make their way every year onto the scene, rendering it nearly impossible to decide on which one to buy. In a perfect world, the breeders would only breed excellent plants, the distributor would only sell the best plants to the nursery, and the nursery would know exactly what cultivars truly perform. But it's a system that is far from perfect. I'm hoping, as someone who has trialed many heucheras over the years, that my research and observations will help you—and my daughter—buy the best heucheras available today.





**Caramel
with hints
of honey**

**Dolce® Creme
Brulee**

I must have missed the classes on the color wheel in college because, like the muted purple group, this is an equally difficult color to describe. Similar to chartreuse-leaved plants, however, this color has a definite eye-catching quality. **Dolce® Creme**

Brulee has caramel-colored leaves but with darker shades throughout, giving it an "edgy" quality. Regardless of how poorly I describe it, this plant has always been an excellent performer and a topic of conversation in the garden.



'Brownies'



'Crimson Curls'



'Frosted Violet'

Shades of crimson

I could not come up with a sexy descriptive name for this color class, and “muted purple” does not justly describe the look or vigor of this group, which features colors that range from deep tan to burgundy.

The beauty of 'Brownies' makes it a major hit across the country; it sports a muted tan on the upper sides of its leaves and a deeper purple beneath. It sounds gruesome, but it's actually quite lovely, particularly if a little wind is present. It is a vigorous grower, with white flowers in fall. Although 'Crimson Curls' is an older cultivar, it has proven its value year after year. The foliage is crimson, and for my money, it is the best ruffled form of heuchera on the market today. It also has what I would describe as excellent persistence in the garden. 'Frosted Violet' has been one of my favorites for years, not only because of the wonderful frosty purple leaf color but also because of its hardy performance. Year in and year out, this has proven to be a winner. Small pink flowers appear in late summer.

To me, heuchera color is secondary to performance. What do I care how good it looks in a pot at the nursery if I can't have some assurance it will also look good in my garden? What I really want to do is drink lots of wine while watching my plants knock my socks off, and with the selections I've profiled here, that is exactly what will happen. I have chosen plants for this article that I feel provide a reasonable chance of good garden performance in most places of the country. In the latest edition (2008) of my book *Herbaceous Perennial Plants*, I list nearly 100 cultivars of heuchera. Another dozen have emerged since that edition was printed. This list, therefore, is only a guideline. It will undoubtedly provoke angry protests against those I chose and, especially, for those I neglected.

But please don't take any of this gardening stuff too seriously. Get outside and have fun, and stop squeezing the tissue. ☺

Allan Armitage is a professor at the University of Georgia, where he also runs his trial gardens.

SOURCES

The following mail-order plant sellers offer the widest selection of the heucheras featured.

- **Big Dipper Farm**, Black Diamond, Wash.; 360-886-8133; www.bigdipperfarm.com
- **Fieldstone Gardens**, Vassalboro, Maine; 207-923-3836; www.fieldstonegardens.com
- **Garden Crossings**, Zeeland, Mich.; 616-875-6355; www.gardencrossings.com
- **Lee's Gardens**, Tremont, Ill.; 309-925-5262; www.leesgardens.com
- **Mason Hollow Nursery**, Mason, N.H.; 603-878-4347; www.masonhollow.com

The best for flowers

Heucheras were historically called “coral bells” because they were prized for their spectacular bell-shaped, coral-colored flowers. Today, although we usually think of heucheras as being grown for their foliage, there are some wonderful flowering forms as well.

'Rave On' (right) is, by far, my favorite flowering selection, combining dark-veined foliage with tons of scarlet-red blooms. It's among the most full-flowered of any heuchera with colorful leaves.



For a video with the author discussing heucheras, go to www.finegardening.com