

Gardening

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ADVERTISING SECTION L



PHOTOS (2): CLAUDE VALLÉE

Rudbeckia Irish Spring, which produces yellow flowers with green hearts from the end of July until the first frost, was one of the public favourites that made it through the plant trials in St. Hyacinthe and, as a result of data collected between June and September last year, earned a spot among Les Exceptionnelles 2007.

Les Exceptionnelles take root, blossom

Plant trials in St. Hyacinthe, combined with public voting, result in a collection of 10 flowering plants best suited to Quebec tastes and growing conditions

JOEL CEFAUSU

A recent survey of horticultural consumption in Quebec shows that more than 60 per cent choose their products at the point of sale. What is offered in stores largely determines consumers' buying decisions, leaving a lot to chance and whimsy.

So how do stores know what is really going to sell? And how do gardeners know if the plants that look good on shelves will work in their flower beds at home?

Quebecers are about to get some help with those questions. In more than 130 Quebec garden centres this season, shoppers will find Les Exceptionnelles, a collection of high-performance annuals selected through rigorous local plant trials.

Launched in 2005, the trials offer Quebec consumers plants best suited for the province's gardens and gardeners. At the Jardin Daniel A. Séguin in St. Hyacinthe, plants are evaluated by a unique formula that uses the public as well as professionals—allowing consumers to intervene directly in the choice of plants marketed by industry. Organizers say this makes Les Exceptionnelles the only promotion program in North America based on public preference.

As trials co-ordinator and horticulture professor at the Institut de technologie agroalimentaire (ITA), Claude Vallée's task is to observe the trial beds and pots, sometimes finding beautiful flowers dried up or succumbing to insects. (No pesticides or special care is applied.)

"It's hard, as a plant lover, to walk by something that is dying," Vallée said, "but we don't do anything beyond what average gardeners would do. It's about neutrality."

Open to the public since 1995, the 11-acre Jardin Séguin invites visitors to linger and admire the magnificent work of ITA horticulture students from the campus across the road. The gardens often serve as venue for special occasions. Marriages, corporate events and artistic attractions regularly occur under tents surrounded by lush vegetation, aquatic displays and stone paths—all amid a functioning, diverse and magnificently landscaped garden born in educational greenhouses nearby.

Visitors to the annual trials vote by planting small stakes in front of plants they prefer, and the stakes are removed daily to avoid influencing voters. The 2007 collection began as 240 new varieties last summer, receiving more than 2,200 votes during the season—a figure that represents one-tenth of all garden visitors.

From early June to mid-September, Vallée collects performance data pertinent to growers, sellers and consumers. This includes a plant's reaction to heat and light, flowering, size, resistance to disease and insects, visual impact, adaptation to our climate and maintenance. At season's end, Vallée and 10 other experts sift through the data for the 30 leading choices to pare down the list.

The jury consists of individuals from industry organizations, retailers and producers

who must choose from the public's choices.

"I give them until the end of the meeting, about an hour or so, to vote," Vallée said.

A grower may have to choose among competitors' products while his crumble in the soil, but that is the nature of plant trials.

"Performance, public preference, commercial potential and availability in Quebec are the sole considerations," Vallée said, adding that plants are seeded and grown by CIDÉS, Quebec's greenhouse research centre, and nearby commercial operations beyond the purview of participants.

Even early public favourites might not make the final cut if they fail miserably on the first cool nights. Alternatively, high-maintenance choices may be unprofitable for producers.

"If we find a balance," Vallée said, "we reduce the risk for growers, garden centres market stronger sellers, and the public gets what it wants. It's a win-win situation."

Information discerned between the lines of the gardening public's voting patterns is also invaluable. For example, interest explodes for some plants in their third week, so retailers should steer impatient gardeners clear of those varieties, which are ideal for people seeking an aura of mystique or anticipation in their gardens.

Patterns also show gardeners prefer container plants: instant gardens that are easier to plant and fetch more at retail.

Please see TRIALS, Page L3



JOEL CEFAUSU

Claude Vallée, horticulture professor at the Institut de technologie agroalimentaire in St. Hyacinthe, co-ordinates the annual plant trials that help determine Les Exceptionnelles. Below, his photo of the begonia Solenia Cherry, which emerged from the 2006 trials as top vote getter and top performer for '07.



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PHOTOS BY CLAUDE VALLÉE

Eight of the 10 flowering plants declared to be Les Exceptionnelles 2007 (the other two appear on Page L1) are, beginning at lower left and moving up and clockwise: Celosia Fresh Look Gold, Cleome Senorita Rosalita, Euphorbia Diamond Frost, Penstemon Phoenix Red, Scaevola Diamond, Anigotanthos Kanga Red, Pansy Karma Deep Blue Blotch and Zinnia Profusion Deep Apricot.



Trial | Winners chosen for their colour, beauty, low maintenance

Continued from Page L1



"Quebec's typical horticultural consumer, according to survey data, is a 55-year-old woman who makes impulse purchases," Vallée said. "And she, studies bear out, favours containers. As the population ages we'll see more of this trend."

This is the first time Quebec's ornamental horticulture industry can put its hands on unbiased and refined data for new varieties.

The Jardin Séguin has already earned its credibility as an official display site for other trial organizations: Netherlands-based Fleuroselect and U.S.-based All-America Selections. That recognition and Vallée's stature in the industry have helped bring Quebec's three large garden-centre banners – Botanix, Hortis and Passion Jardins – on board to simultaneously carry and promote the line. Some Ontario stores have also expressed interest.

At Pépinière Locas in Fabreville, the collection has already piqued the curiosity of many customers, said manager Annie Giasson, adding: "It's excellent for customer service, with the posters and the explanation of how these were selected."

The first comment Giasson usually encounters is: "I am really not any good in my garden. Can I do this?"

With Les Exceptionnelles, the answer is yes, absolutely.

"They are chosen for their low maintenance and their variety of colours and beauty," Giasson said, "so you can't go wrong."

Les Exceptionnelles garnered a marketing award from Montreal's Botanical Garden last year when the first winners came out.

Marketing the program means telling the story of how Les Exceptionnelles are selected. It all lends a homegrown feel, Vallée said, even if plants are developed as far away as Australia.

"The point is they work here – and appeal to Quebecers' tastes."



Using horticulture to beautify Quebec

JOËL CÉAUSU

If Gérald Tremblay wants to "green up" Montreal, Marie-André Boucher is waiting to show him how it's done. But he may have trouble getting through because her phone is ringing off the hook.

Boucher heads an innovative program that encourages beautification projects in Quebec municipalities through horticulture and sustainable development practices. Les Fleurons du Québec was launched last year by a coalition of horticultural industry groups and municipal authorities to recognize cities and the public for their efforts. The program is meant to motivate cities and residents to improve their environments each year and boost interest in ornamental horticulture.

In its second year, 102 municipalities have already been accredited, and another 150 are awaiting assessment. The first crop of participants offered a "superb portrait of a flowering Quebec," said Jean Grégoire, president of the Fédération Interdisciplinaire de l'Horticulture ornementale du Québec.

When the first classifications came in last fall, 17 of 21 tourist areas of Quebec were represented. The program's goal is to get 600 towns on board by 2009.

"We'll do it too," Boucher said, "especially as the word gets around as to how valuable this work can be."

Participating towns are assessed for embellishment

of all sectors of their municipality, earning additional points for good environmental practices and rewarding collective efforts. Up to 1,000 points can be earned in the classification that translates into one to five fleurons, or florets – from "notable efforts" to "spectacular."

Rankings can be posted in official tourist guides, maps, road signage and other places for a period of three years. From industrial parks and town entry points, to churches, private homes, schools, playgrounds and parking lots, the signs, grass, plants, flowers and overall use of green space is assessed and evaluated according to more than 60 pages of objective criteria by professional assessors. Municipal policies and programs are also examined to ensure they respect environmental principles and all Quebec environmental regulations.

Towns can use the ranking as a tool for visibility when promoting themselves for tourism or business, and Les Fleurons du Québec has a complete package of municipal signage, labels and logos to keep the program consistent and recognizable throughout the province.

Rosémère, which earned four florets, is where the first new municipal signs will be unveiled next month. Quebec City, Westmount, and Saint-Bruno-de-Montarville were the only other cities achieving four florets, the highest attained of a possible five.

Please see FLEURONS, Page L5



Les Exceptionnelles 2007:

Begonia 'Solenia Cherry' – It was the top vote getter and top performer. This vigorous, uniform, well-branched plant showed copious cherry-red blossoms all season long.

Celosia 'Fresh Look Gold' – Also known as cockscomb, it has loosely-clustered flowers and lends stunning hues to gardens. Fond of well-drained soils, it tolerates the sun's heat very well.

Anigotanthos Kanga 'Red' – It was so popular, said Claude Vallée, that Quebec producers cornered the market on these plants with peculiar flowers reminiscent of its common name: kangaroo paws.

Rudbeckia 'Irish Spring' – This was another public favourite, producing yellow flowers with green hearts from the end of July until the first frosts.

Penstemon 'Phoenix Red' – It's a rustic-looking plant that grows red flowers all summer long. Good in the centre of container arrangements and flower beds surrounded by hardy perennials.

Cleome 'Senorita Rosalita' – It has pink flowers tinted with purple, with very compact, toothy foliage reaching 90 centimetres in height with a distinguished allure.

Euphorbia 'Diamond Frost' – A multiple award winner with a fragile appearance, but very resistant to heat and aridity and flowers up to the first autumn frosts.

Zinnia 'Profusion Deep Apricot' – A vigorous annual that quickly covers itself with abundant dark apricot-coloured flowers that dissipate into pastel tints with age.

Pansy 'Karma Deep Blue Blotch' – With breathtaking blue flowers, this floriferous plant resisted the heat so prevalent at the end of June and the beginning of August.

Scaevola 'Diamond' – Also called fan-flower, it's a dense crawling plant with many white, blue-bordered flowers. With excellent heat strength and recovery following winter scarcity, it is ideal in bulk for ground cover or bordering plants.

JOËL CÉAUSU



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