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New bedding annuals improve on old favorites

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HOUSTON: Not every *plant* needs "improvement." But when hybridizers make breakthroughs in color, heat and disease resistance, gardening can become easier and more enjoyable.

Here are new takes on four hot-weather staples:

Coleus

Remember when coleus was a shade *plant*? Then sun coleuses were introduced. "Henna," a new coleus from Ball Horticultural Co., can be grown in sun or shade. The leaf pattern and colors of this flashy new coleus are reminiscent of henna body art.

The chartreuse leaves are etched with copper on top; the undersides are dark burgundy.

Expect this warm-season annual to reach at least 24 inches tall and about 16 inches wide. Pinch to encourage bushy growth.

Zinnia

This heat-tolerant annual is a favorite in breeders' hands. There are taller, highly colorful single and double types excellent for cutting. Lower-growing varieties make soft mounds in the front of a summer border.

Zinnias need sun, great drainage and good air circulation. Without them, the *flowers* may keep coming, but the foliage, susceptible to fungal diseases, can look awful. Breeders have pursued less-susceptible varieties. Drought-tolerant All-America Selections winner Zinnia angustifolia "Crystal White" is a mounding, narrow-leaf cultivar that sidesteps disease. The newest disease-resistant, drought-tolerant introduction is the Zahara series (Zinnia marylandica) from Ball Horticultural Co. Varieties in this multicolor series are about 18 inches tall and wide, and the *flowers* are larger than those in the popular Profusion series.

Vinca

We thought vincas, or periwinkles to some, were bullet-proof. They'd grow and bloom, then suddenly die as *plants* fell victim to aerial phytophthora, a nasty fungal disease. Vincas are especially vulnerable in wet weather, so many gardeners used to wait until it was hot and dry to *plant*.

Now, we can color sunny summer hot spots with the many-colored, disease-resistant Cora and Nirvana series.

SunPatiens

No annual outshines impatiens for color impact in shade. Now we can enjoy the flat-faced blooms in squinty areas of the garden. SunPatiens, introduced three years ago through the *Home Depot's VIVA!* collection, produce 2- to 3-inch *flowers* from spring until frost. They are a cross between "regular" (Impatiens wallerana) and New Guinea impatiens.

The color selection has expanded to include lilac, magenta, rose coral and variegated white and salmon. No deadheading is required, but keep 2 to 3 inches of mulch around the *plants* to conserve soil moisture.

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