

What do most gardeners want? Low-fuss and sustainable gardens

cm www.centralmaine.com/2017/02/12/what-do-most-gardeners-want-low-fuss-and-sustainable-gardens/

By Tom Atwell

Homeowners usually want gardens that are low maintenance and sustainable. The two attributes are not synonyms, but if your garden has one of them, it probably has the other, too.

Kerry Ann Mendez, a garden writer and professional gardener who moved to Kennebunk three years ago after a career in upstate New York, spoke to the Maine Landscape and Nursery Association in January about “plants that save time, manpower and money.”

MORE FROM MENDEZ

KERRY ANN MENDEZ has written three gardening books: “The Right-Size Flower Garden: Simplify Your Outdoor Space with Smart Design Solutions and Plant Choices,” “The Ultimate Flower Gardener’s Top Ten Lists” and “Top Ten Lists for Shade Gardens: Seeing Your Way Out of the Dark.” She said a fourth is in the works.

Sign up for Mendez’s monthly Perennially Yours gardening newsletter at pyours.com.

MAINE LANDSCAPE AND NURSERY ASSOCIATION AWARDS

HAMMOND BUCK, owner of Plants Unlimited Nursery in Rockport, won the AI Black Award as Maine Horticulturist of the Year at MELNA’s annual meeting in January. His daughter, Emily Buck, who works with him in the business, was the Young Nursery Professional of the Year in 2015.

NEIL HUTCHINGS, purchaser for Gnome Landscaping in Falmouth, was named Young Nursery Professional of the Year.

Because she was talking to a group of landscape professionals, Mendez was describing what their potential customers wanted – which turns out to be what just about every gardener wants.

“The people we are seeing today do not want high-fuss gardens,” Mendez said. “They have to be almost turnkey,” meaning that the professional completes it and the homeowner just sits back and enjoys it.

If you are planting or converting your own garden, you should aim for the same result – it’s just that you have some intensive work before you get to sit down and enjoy it.

The plants Mendez designated as landscape-worthy – and the talk contained almost 100 of them – had to meet at least one of two criteria, and most met both.

First, they had to be tough, meaning that they had to survive without regular watering and be able to resist pests – diseases, insects, deer and others – without requiring chemical treatments. Here in Maine we rarely have to worry about water (with the exception of last summer), but it is a precious resource, and people should try to limit its use in their gardens. Chemical treatment of plants, even if the chemicals meet the standards of organic growing, require spending time and money, both of which are often in short supply. Also, they’re potentially harmful to the environment.

Second, landscape-worthy plants have to serve many purposes. If you give garden space to a plant, it should be attractive for a long time, with a long bloom time or attractive foliage, fruits or seeds. In addition, the plants should

benefit pollinators and other wildlife.

Now, I'm not going to list all of the plants Mendez mentioned. It would bore you to tears, take too much space, and you wouldn't remember them all. So I'll just mention a few things that hit home with me.

Hostas are a garden mainstay. They do well in shade, which is why my wife, Nancy, and I have about 100 of them spread all around our gardens. They are generally low-maintenance, and they come in a variety of colors.

Don't pick a hosta solely for its foliage, the attribute many gardeners consider first. Hostas also have blossoms that are attractive and often fragrant, so you can grow them near home entrances and on patios and decks where people sit outside.

Two varieties Mendez likes for that purpose are "Stained Glass" and "Guacamole." Both have large, bright, textured and multicolored leaves that can withstand more sun than many other hostas.

Where they really shine, however, is that they produce highly fragrant lavender flowers, 30 inches tall for "Stained Glass" and 3 feet tall for "Guacamole."

One drawback to hostas is that deer, slugs and snails love to eat them. Deer will take hostas right to the ground, while chomping slugs will make the leaves look like Swiss cheese. Mendez said that choosing hostas with highly quilted or puckered leaves or with blue foliage will keep the damage to a minimum. The pests don't like the feel of the textured leaves, and the blue color is caused by a waxy coating that the pests don't like either. Two varieties she recommended are "Abiqua Drinking Gourd" and "Frances Williams."

Peonies are a favorite old-time flower with large, bright flowers. But they present problems. Herbaceous peonies sometimes require hoops to keep them upright, while tree peonies have brittle stems that stay up all winter and can easily break.

Mendez recommends intersectional peonies, also called Itoh peonies, a cross between the two.

"They die back to the ground in the fall, but they have stiff stems, so they don't require staking, which is a lot less work," Mendez said. She recommended especially "Bartzella," with fragrant yellow blooms that can be as large as 8 inches across.

Just one more recommendation: On Jan. 8 [I wrote a column on *Asclepias tuberosa*, the butterfly weed, being the Perennial Plant Association's plant of the year](#), partly for its assistance to monarch butterflies and other pollinators. Mendez said that gardeners who have an aversion to orange – while I don't understand it, there are a lot of them – can try a cultivar called "Hello Yellow" with, unsurprisingly, yellow flowers.

I'll save the argument about whether cultivars of native plants are actually natives for another day.

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