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## Vegetable Gardening Among 2009's Trends

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## Vegetable Gardening Among 2009's Trends

LINCOLN, Neb. & While the winter landscape sleeps in shades of gray and brown, gardeners dream in the colors of spring -- lush green foliage and the vibrant pinks, blues, oranges, yellows, and reds of blossoms.

It will be awhile before gardeners can dig in the dirt but already some gardening trends are emerging: landscape sustainability, native plants in home landscapes, container gardening, and increased interest in vegetable gardening. And this spring, just as in any other year, nurseries will sprout new varieties.

One of the biggest trends is increasing interest in vegetable gardening, said Dale Lindgren, horticulturist at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln West Central Research and Extension Center in North Platte.

Last year, vegetable plant sales were up 10-15 percent and that trend is expected to continue. Vegetable gardening is becoming more appealing as people try to save money at the grocery store during these tough economic times. Some gardeners are focused on food safety and believe that food they grow themselves is safer, which is related to the burgeoning interest in organically grown food, Lindgren said.

"Last year, we got a lot of questions about local food, and I think we'll see that again," said Kim Todd, UNL landscape horticulture specialist and "Backyard Farmer" host. "There are a lot of people who want to grow at least a little bit of their own food, and more people are intrigued with edible woody plants such as apples and apricots."

In the last few years, interest in heirloom vegetables and flowers also is on the upswing. Old-fashioned flowers, such as hollyhocks, are receiving more attention because they don't require much water. Heirloom vegetables, particularly tomatoes, are grown for their flavor, Lindgren said.

Another trend is blended gardens, which include both edible ornamental vegetables and flowering plants. Vegetables such as colorful peppers and eggplant can provide visual pleasure as well as food. This can be a good option if garden space is limited, he said.

"One of the overall garden trends is landscape sustainability, which means the landscape is one that we can take care of without harming the environment," said Sarah Browning, UNL Extension educator.

A critical aspect of sustainability is planting species that are well-adapted to the climate and don't need a lot of



supplemental watering. Native plants often are good options, she said.

The Retree Nebraska initiative is part of the larger returning trend of planting trees. "People are more aware of the impact of the simple act of planting a tree to conserve energy," Todd said.

Container gardening will be big.

"You can find big containers, small containers, containers in all kinds of shapes and materials," Todd said. "It (container gardening) is easy, it can be done near the house, and containers are easy to move around and change."

Both flowering plants and edible plants can work well in containers. "And if you feel really creative, you can use woody cut florals and other materials in your container after the growing season," she said.

Every gardening season has some "hot" plants. Plants with brightly colored foliage seem to be popular, as are smaller evergreens that can add an architectural element to the landscape, Todd said.

Another trend is the comeback of coleus. This started a few years ago but is continuing with new varieties that include new leaf shapes and colors. Many of the new varieties tolerate a lot more sun than the traditional shade-loving varieties, Browning said.

Interest in ornamental grasses continues. Shenandoah, a new switchgrass, has a compact shape and stays more upright than some other varieties. The leaves are green in spring, tipped dark red by mid-summer and entirely red and orange in fall.

Shrub roses continue to be popular because they require less maintenance than hybrid teas and there will be some new varieties. "They provide a lot of color and impact in the landscape but with low maintenance," Browning said.

A new shrub is the Endless Summer Twist and Shout hydrangea, Browning said. The reblooming lacecap, which has two kinds of blossoms, blooms in spring on old wood and again on new wood.

Also new is a dwarf butterfly bush, Blue Chip, which is part of the Lo && Behold series. It only grows about 2 feet tall so it will work well in containers and smaller landscapes, Browning said.

Lindgren, an internationally known penstemon breeder, developed Sweet Joanne penstemon, which had limited availability last year. It will be easier to find this year, he said.

He also has developed Heart's Desire dianthus, which will have limited availability in 2009.

While many gardeners, especially the more experienced ones, try something new each year, prepare for some disappointment. Sometimes, newer varieties are not as resistant to disease or pests or don't perform as well as older varieties, which have been tested more, Lindgren said.

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