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SOME LIKE IT HOT
13 sun-loving plants for summer

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Sol survivors
These lucky 13 not only take the heat but thrive in it

By MARIANA GREENE
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ow that corporate growers are (finally) looking at the South — including Texas — as a burgeoning market for selling garden plants, they are considering a new hybrid’s heat tolerance. The one-size-fits-all selections that grow in New Jersey and Connecticut do not necessarily survive our long summers.

They’ve gotten the message: We gardeners hardly care a whit about how much cold a plant can take. Heat is our mortal enemy.

The Texas system of A&M extension offices and their trial plots, the Dallas Arboretum’s plainspoken research director Jimmy Turner, who’s in charge of the trial gardens there, and the Home staff’s own amateur backyard trials contributed to this roundup of summer survivors.

Unless you’re buying a plant that was developed in the country’s southern tier, such as Georgia’s Athens Select brand and those carrying the Plant Select label, a partnership between Denver Botanic Garden and Colorado State University, it’s still a good idea to be wary of a generic label’s instructions. If it reads “sun,” know that the plant would probably prefer a North Texas location that gets some shade on a summer afternoon.

Also, these plants will fare better if they have time to get established before the high heat hits. Since there’s no predicting exactly when that will be, the sooner you get plants in the dirt, the better.

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Penstems are the “silver bullet” to the arboretum’s Jimmy Turner, and they ought to be every North Texas gardener’s summer standby, too. They flower prodigiously all summer in sun or shade and into the fall until frost. The bonus is the butterflies: Penstems are a favorite nectar source for many species. There’s an assortment of colors and shapes to keep everyones’ front gardens looking the same: ‘Graffiti’ series (12 inches tall), ‘Kaleidoscope’ series (18 to 24 inches), ‘Butterfly’ and ‘Galaxy’ (3 to 4 feet).

1. Angelonia is becoming known as summer snapdragon. Proven Winners’ ‘Angelface’ series, an annual for sun, blooms all summer and doesn’t need staking. Recent introductions from several companies include dramatic new hues and bicolor blossoms.

2. Pentas are the “silver bullet” to the arboretum’s Jimmy Turner, and they ought to be every North Texas gardener’s summer standby, too. They flower prodigiously all summer in sun or shade and into the fall until frost. The bonus is the butterflies: Pentas are a favorite nectar source for many species. There’s an assortment of colors and shapes to keep everyones’ front gardens looking the same: ‘Graffiti’ series (12 inches tall), ‘Kaleidoscope’ series (18 to 24 inches), ‘Butterfly’ and ‘Galaxy’ (3 to 4 feet).

3. Diascia ‘Red Ace’, a mounding annual, has the best heat tolerance of any variety tested at the arboretum, but it needs to be established before summer temperatures hit. Don’t pull it if it’s already in your garden. Otherwise, save it and the pretty apricot and hot pink hybrids for fall planting.

4. The relatively new Pfitzer annual ‘Visions’ series (Carmen, Lilac, pink and white) is bred from two Texas natives. It is a mounding annual that is especially pretty in large mixed containers because it fills out and spills over, softening a pot’s edges.

5. Like penstems, every North Texas flower garden needs the annual ‘Violet Flare’, a harlequin pattern in yellow, reddish-purple and white. Choose a cultivar to grow upright or trail and bloom in shade or sun; all are heat-tolerant, and bloom until frost.

6. Although Convolvulus ‘Blue Casbah’ is listed as an annual for sun or shade, it often perennialsizes in North Texas gardens. In the ground it forms a mat of blue flowers, but it’s also a good candidate for hanging baskets, large containers and window boxes.
3 Cuphea
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Cupheas are stars in Jimmy Turner’s estimation. Hybridizers are selecting bigger flowers and curious color combinations (such as ‘Flamenco Tango’, shown). “It takes full, hot, burning sun. No shade,” says Mr. Turner. “If you can’t grow this, give up gardening.” Peachy ‘Caribbean Sunset’ attracts hummingbirds and really comes on in the fall; the ‘Flamenco’ series blooms half-dollar-size flowers in hot colors.

4 Abutilon

Abutilon, or flowering maple, likes shade. It’s a prime candidate for landscapes in older neighborhoods, where trees have matured and cast long shadows. Planted in a container or in the ground, abutilon may die back after a winter freeze but re-sprouts in spring. Hybridizers are focusing on new colors and variegated leaves. The hybrid shown is Proven Winners’ ‘Melon Sorbet’.

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9 Celosia ‘Fresh Look’, an annual, was named an All American Selection for its hardiness. Easy to grow from seed, the red, yellow or orange plumes stand almost 3 feet tall. If your garden has a trouble spot of full sun where everything else has fried, try this.

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The Ageratum 'Artist' series, with cultivars in shades of blue, violet, pink and white, 'is the only ageratum to ever buy,' declares the arboretum's Jimmy Turner. Last year's specimens planted in late February at the arboretum bloomed through spring and summer until the first frost. How did other ageratum cultivars fare on 100-degree days? 'I don't know,' says funny guy Turner, 'because they were dead!'

11
Last year Mr. Turner declared 'Tidal Wave Silver' petunia from Ball Horticultural the only petunia for North Texas. If you planted it, you already know that it is not an annual like other petunias. It comes back from the root at quadruple the size of the original bedding plant. It's so rambunctious that Ball suggests planting the Easy Wave series (seven colors), which is more mannerly, unless you especially need a hedge of them. The new Double Wave color for the season is an inky purply-blue called 'Blue Velvet'.

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True geraniums, commonly called cranesbill geranium, are notorious for refusing to do well with our long, hot summers. They prefer England. But the new Geranium 'Tiny Monster' from Proven Winners is one of those hybrids touted for its heat tolerance. 'A 3-foot mound is 'tiny'?' asks Mr. Turner. A perennial for sun or light shade, he terms it a "favorite" and "tough."

13
Proven Winners Euphorbia 'Diamond Frost' looks like a meek little plant in a 4-inch pot. But over the summer it swells to a lacy show of white and green that lasts until frost. Last fall's terrible heat never touched it. New euphorbias from other companies (for instance, EuroAmerican's 'Helena' and Proven Selections' 'Efarthia') also show promise, especially if grown in big containers, says Mr. Turner, so the soils fast-draining. (A heads-up from Jimmy: He's going to substitute euphorbias for ornamental kales in next fall's mixed containers.)