New *Pentas lanceolata* offer solutions to landscape problems

For those of us in warmer climates, we can all rejoice that pentas or Egyptian star flower is seeing a renaissance in breeding. It seems every breeding company is coming out with a new seed-grown series of this tough annual.

Historically, gardeners overlooked this genus’ bad traits of gangly, too-tall growth and sparse flowering because of its ability to thrive in hot, humid summers, versatility to grow in full sun or shade and tolerance for higher-PH soils. The vibrant-colored flower clusters also had great promise. The earliest pentas on the market were not particularly showy in the landscape or in retail containers.

With the current selection of seed-grown cultivars you can find plants from 10-24 inches tall in a range of colors. The onus of this new breeding has been to create a vigorous, heavily flowering, well-branched plant from seed. This new group not only excels in the garden, but also looks appealing to retail customers in 4-inch to 1-gallon containers.

Why grow pentas?

Pentas are becoming an integral part of the summer landscape in regions with warm summers. The compact habit of the new seed-grown cultivars and their ease of production have helped them become a staple in the industry. Like all pentas, the new seed-grown series shrug off heat and humidity and really...
shine during the hottest days of summer.

Flower clusters cover the plants from April until October without a pause. Additionally, these new dwarf cultivars never need shearing, deadheading or staking. Many gardeners don’t realize that pentas work equally well in full sun or light shade. They can be paired with lantanas in full hot blasting sun, or they can sit in the shade with impatiens.

For the heaviest flower production, water regularly and fertilize monthly. In full sun, pentas require more water. Soil should be amended with composted organic matter to increase drainage.

One of the hardest places in the gardens is that spot with morning and late afternoon shade that receives full midday sun. Pentas are the perfect answer to this situation. Pentas are the perfect solution to the bed that starts in shade and ends in full sun. Quite often you are faced with an area that needs the formality of a single variety of plant used in mass, but the bed spans both shade and sun areas. Pentas are a natural for this area. The plants in shade will be slightly larger, but they will both flower quite well.

Another, and possibly the best reason to grow pentas, are the butterflies and hummingbirds they attract. Plants are almost never without a visitor hovering overhead.

Growing information

Here are some basics for growing pentas.

Watering. Let the soil dry between watering. Pentas are drought-tolerant, low-moisture plants. Excess watering increases susceptibility to root, especially during cool, cloudy weather.

Fertilizer. Constant feed at 200 parts per million nitrogen. Mature root-bound plants may require a higher dose. Yellow mature leaves or puckered young leaves are usually signs of magnesium deficiency.

Temperature. Maximum growth occurs at

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5 'Graffiti Violet' has the perfect balance of retail appeal and garden performance.

6 'Kaleidoscope Appleblossom's unusual flowers are pale pink with deep-red venation that becomes more pronounced as temperatures rise.

7 'Kaleidoscope Carmine' has fuchsia-pink flowers.

8 Starla Pink grows slightly taller than the rest of the series members.
night temperatures above 60°F-65°F and above day temperatures of 72°F. Growth and flower production both stop at 50°F.

**pH.** 6.5 to 6.8.

**Light levels.** Use high light (maximum light). No shade cloth is necessary. Low light delays production.

**Insects and diseases.** Watch for aphids, thrips, *Pythium, Rhizoctonia* and *Botrytis*.

**New series on the market**

**New Look series (Benary Seed).** This was one of the very first seed-grown pentas cultivars. This compact series reaches 10-12 inches tall and performs well in 4- to 6-inch containers. I think this series sacrificed plant vigor for plant size and does not withstand full sun in hotter climates. It’s best planted in light shade. This is still the most compact series. It’s available in five colors: Red, Pink, Violet, Rose and White.

**Butterfly series (PanAmerican Seed).** Soon after the New Look series came on the market, the Butterfly series was introduced. These F₁ hybrids have incredible hybrid vigor and produce well-branched plants 18 inches wide by 24 inches tall. This series has larger, 3-inch flower clusters with excellent garden performance. Butterfly members have comparable growth rate to vegetative varieties. Series colors are Blush (pale soft-pink to almost white flowers); Cherry Red (bright scarlet red with a white eye); Deep Pink (true bright pink); Deep Rose (turns cherry rose under high light); Light Lavender; Red (darker red than Deep Rose without the white eye); and Lavender Shades. Lavender Shades is the most compact of the series; it’s two-thirds the height of other colors. Deep Rose is one to two weeks earlier than the rest of the series.

**Graffiti series (Benary Seed).** If I was a grower and could only choose one series to grow, this would be it. It has the perfect balance of retail appeal and garden performance. Plants have great basal branching early on and fill out small containers with mounds of foliage covered in large flower clusters. In areas with long summers and high heat, plants reach 15-18 inches tall. In cooler climes, they are 12-15 inches tall. Lipstick, Rose, Lavender and Violet are the most vigorous, with White being the slowest. In my trial grounds at the Dallas Arboretum this series holds up to full sun and over 100°F temperatures with no problem. The compact habit makes it useful in both container plantings and en masse. This series has eight colors: Bright Red (deep-red flower clusters with white centers); Lavender (soft lavender and the most floriferous of the series); Lipstick (vibrant rosy pink); Pink (bubblegum pink flower clusters on a highly branched habit); Red Lace (scarlet-red flowers are set off by pure white, lace-like anthers); Rose; Violet; and White.

**Kaleidoscope series (Benary Seed).** This series is much like the Graffiti in habit, but with slightly larger plants (18-25 inches tall) and larger flower clusters. This extremely floriferous series is unrivaled for landscape color and performance. Early growth is dense with a heavy-branching habit. As plants mature, they are coated in 3-inch flower clusters. I would recommend this variety as the best for landscape performance, even though it’s only available in four colors. Appleblossom has unusual flowers of pale pink with deep-red venation that becomes more pronounced as temperatures rise. Carmine has a fuchsia-pink flowers. Deep Red has dark, pure-red flowers with white anthers. Lilac is vibrant purple.

**‘Northern Lights’ (Benary Seed).** In an effort to expand the use of pentas into cooler growing regions with low pH, Benary created ‘Northern Lights.’ This variety is bred to have increased tolerance to lower growing temperatures and still stands up to high summer heat. This variety is medium lavender-purple. The flower heads are more open and free form than other cultivars. In the landscape, plants reach 20 inches by the end of the season.

**Starla series (Goldsmith Seeds).** This series has a smaller growth habit of 14-18 inches with Starla Pink growing slightly taller. Though slower growing during cooler weather, this variety shines in the scorching heat of summer. Plants are constantly covered in 2- to 3-inch flower heads during the hottest months. Colors are White, Red, Pink, Rose and Blush.