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All-Stars: Winners withstood tough review

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Low-maintenance, drought-tolerant and attracts beneficial wildlife: That sounds like a perfect plant for the Sacramento Valley.

Add into that profile colorful blooms and good-looking foliage, disease resistance and overall reliability. At UC Davis, those qualities make an All-Star.

In honor of the university's on-going centennial celebration, UC Davis' arboretum developed a list of 100 can't-miss plants for the future – the Arboretum All-Stars.

"We got this idea how to promote more drought-tolerant plants," explained Ellen Zagory, the arboretum's director of horticulture. "We started out really small. This is our test year. If it works, we'll expand."

Today, the arboretum will kick off its All-Star program in earnest with a major sale at the campus' teaching nursery. But by month's end, many of the All-Star plants will be available in local retail nurseries, too – a first for both the All-Stars and the arboretum.

This All-Star team has plenty of heavy hitters, from eye-catching purple dome asters to graceful Washington hawthorn trees (*Crataegus phaenopyrum*). There are no-fuss plants for every use such as the tea olive tree (*Osmanthus x fortunei*), a dependable screen that thrives even on the north sides of buildings while delivering an intoxicating fragrance, or cape balsam (*Bulbine frutescens*), a nearly indestructible rock garden favorite with neon-yellow flowers.

Eventually, the Arboretum All-Star logo could be a symbol that home gardeners can look for anywhere in California and know they're getting a tough, people-pleasing plant that birds, bees and butterflies like, too.

"These plants were all field tested at the university," Zagory said. "We know they'll grow here. But we're also working with the university's Cooperative Extension program to field test the plants at 10 sites throughout the state. ... I can't wait to get their feedback. We want to make sure these plants will thrive in San Diego at the beach, or up in Placerville."

Started in 2004, the program developed slowly. That it reached fruition as the university celebrates its centennial "is a happy coincidence," Zagory said.

The current interest in drought-tolerant plants also spurred the program's expansion.

"But here in California, we're always preparing for drought," she added. "If we're not in one now, droughts will always come back. When the arboretum was first started, we had no irrigation. Our plants had to be drought tolerant. That ended up to be a real advantage. We amassed a huge collection of plants that lived."

About 5,000 varieties of plants occupy the arboretum's 100 acres, which made selecting the best of the best difficult. As with any All-Star team, there were plenty of candidates.

"We got five horticulturists in a room and started debating," Zagory said, adding that all 100 All-Stars earned a unanimous vote from the committee.

About a third of the All-Stars are California natives. Valley oaks made the list. So did more unusual natives, such as the California pipevine (*Aristolochia californica*) with pipe-shaped flowers.

The deciding factor for many was that the All-Stars should be attractive as close to year-round as possible.

Three wholesale nurseries – Native Sons, McCall's Nurseries and High Ranch Nursery – signed on to propagate and distribute the All-Stars to a wider audience through retail nurseries and other outlets. The plants should be showing up for sale in several Northern California locations later this month. An updated list of nurseries is available on the arboretum's Web site.

"People will be able to go to their local nursery and look for the Arboretum All-Star logo," Zagory said.

Zagory and her crew also have been pitching the All-Stars to local landscapers. They recently made a presentation to the California chapter of the Association of Professional Landscape Designers that was well received.

Landscape designer Cheryl Buckwalter has been an All-Star advocate since the program's introduction.

"In my designs, I don't use plants I can't get," said Buckwalter, owner of Landscape Liaisons. "They're making these plants a lot more available. I'm thrilled. I've been telling everybody I know."

Buckwalter recently worked with a Placer County homeowner who replaced the house's conventional lawn with all All-Stars.

"What's excellent is they've really notched it up to help people in general become familiar with the arboretum and these all-star plants," Buckwalter said of the UCD program. "This is such a responsible thing to do. They set up criteria for selecting plants with a very scientific approach and also a very sound horticultural approach.

"These plants thrive in our conditions," she added. "There are a lot of wonderful plants out there, but this list helps people understand the concept of hydro-zoning and putting the right plant in the right place. We're setting them up for success instead of death."

The All-Stars can be seen in action in the arboretum's own gardens. New markers with the All-Star logo and background information help point them out.

A stroll through the campus gardens reveals several standouts such as the cut-leaf lilac (*Syringa x laciniata*), now covered with fragrant lavender blossoms, or the charming snow-in-summer (*Cerastium tomentosum*), a ground cover with drifts of white flowers over silvery leaves.

"It grows in shade or sun, with high water or low, and just keeps blooming," Zagory said of snow-in-summer. "It's a perfect plant."

And that could be an all-star in any garden.

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