

Petunia is Popular Annual; Many New Hybrids On Sale

By EDNA KING MANDEVILLE

Petunias are one of the most popular flowers grown by home gardeners today. This has been true for years and there is no sign that their popularity is lessening. In fact, recent developments in the petunia family are making them more popular than ever before.

There are many reasons why most gardeners grow petunias. They are one of the most colorful of all annuals. They are excellent for inside decorations as well as for the garden. They grow in most any soil and require very little attention once they are underway. They withstand the effects of heat and drought much better than most flowers.

Petunias are a native of South America. Petunia hybrids, the flower that we know today, is a composite of two flowers that grew wild in Argentina. They are petunia axillaris and petunia violacea. As far as is known, petunia hybrids is the result of natural crosses and not through any human efforts or plan.

About 75 years ago work began to develop new varieties of petunias. Much of it was done in Germany. Later excellent progress was made in California and Japan.

One of the earliest advances was made in California where Theodosia Shepherd developed the famous giants of California petunias. These mammoth flowers with their colorful fringed and ruffled petals are still one of the most popular petunias. Perhaps the leading flower of the giant fringed petunias is Theodosia, named in honor of the originator of the California giants.

In answer to the demand for a dwarfier, more compact strain, came the nana compacta type. This group includes such well-known and popular varieties as Rose of Heaven (or Celestial Rose), English Violet and Fire Chief, the first of the scarlet-red petunias.

Dwarf Developed
The next step was to develop large flowers on dwarf plants. The leading mixture in this group is Little Giants. The flowers are fringed and ruffled like the Giants of California. Although they are not as large as the California strain, nevertheless they really are Little Giants.

The leading separate color of the strain is Pink Frills, a soft pink flower that literally covers its mound-like plants.

While all of this splendid work was being done on petunias in California, an even more remarkable strain was produced in Japan. I refer to the all-double-petunia. The double petunias

that were being grown in California, had about 75 per cent of the flowers fully double. But the all-double strain is 100 per cent double. The most satisfactory of the all-double is the Victoria mixture. The flowers are giant size, colorful, and fully double.

For years no American grower could fathom the secret of the all-double feature of the Japanese strains. It was finally discovered that the seeds were produced by hybridizing known parents by hand to be sure of the offspring. A task that is not as simple as it sounds. The result is a first cross hybrid which is now becoming known to flower gardeners as an F1 Hybrid. The letter F comes from the Latin derivative filial (pertaining to son or daughter). The 1 indicates the 1st generation.

This idea of controlled parentage has been carried to great lengths by American flower breeders. F1 varieties of petunias are becoming quite popular. Two of the 1957 All-American winners are F1's, namely, Red Satin, the best of the red petunias, and Glitters, a beautiful red and white flower. Other leading F1 petunias are Comanche, Balserina, and Fire Dance. In addition to true-breeding type, which is about 100 per cent with F1 strains, they have added vigor, which makes them sturdy plants.

But breeders did not stop at F1 hybrids, they went on to F2's, which are second generation hybrids. The offspring of an F2 variety will not produce identical flowers. There will be variations. While that is objectionable if one is growing one color of a flower, it is an asset if one is aiming for the most complete mixture possible. An F2 mixture contains colors and color combinations that may never have been seen before. It also has plenty of hybrid vigor.

Perhaps the best known F2 hybrid petunia is called Carnival. These giant flowers include blue, white, crimson, rose, carmine, scarlet, salmon pink, red and lavender, to mention a few. In addition there are bicolored flowers combining white and pink, white and blue, and white and rose. A planting of Carnival petunia is a sight to behold.

In closing let me comment briefly on the culture of petunias. They are easy to grow if the seeds are not sown too deep. In fact, they should hardly be covered at all. Sprinkle them on top and firm the soil gently with the palm of the hand. Push down a bit but not too much. Then keep the ground moist until the seedlings appear. It is as simple as that and well worth the effort.

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