

# Conversation-piece plants

During the summer months, I often entertain visitors to my garden. This past summer was no exception.

I find it enjoyable to chat with guests because it gives me insight as to what others are doing in their own gardens, what plants they are familiar with, and those they have not seen before. Some plants tend to generate more interest than others. Here are five, not in any particular order, that started many conversations.

## ***Digiplexis* 'Illumination Flame'**

A new plant in my garden and a relatively new plant on the market, *Digiplexis* 'Illumination Flame' has been an outstanding performer, flowering all summer.

The plant is a cross between *Digitalis purpurea* (foxglove) and *Isoplexis canariensis* (Canary Island foxglove). In 2012, it received the Plant of the Year award at the Royal Horticultural Society Chelsea Flower Show; the following year, it received *Greenhouse Grower's* Medal of Excellence, as well as the New Varieties Showcase People's Choice award and a Plant of Merit award at the 2013 Farwest Trade Show.

I planted the *Digiplexis* in a container on the deck and in full sun. All summer it had spikes of rose and soft orange flowers that appeared on stalks up to 3 feet tall.

As the flowers on these stalks faded, I mistakenly thought the blooming period was over. When I removed the faded stalks, new ones appeared, and while they were not as tall, they certainly were colorful and continued to bloom all summer.

Is this plant winter hardy in our zone? Good question. It is rated for Zone 8, so theoretically, yes. However,

## **What I'm Hearing**

## **Mike Darcy**



in speaking with Sandra Adams from Portland Nursery, I learned that she and three others from Portland Nursery planted it last year, and none of the plants survived the winter. One person

doesn't survive," Sandra said. Maybe this winter will be milder and we can see what happens, but my guess is that we will be buying them again next year."

I agree it is worth growing, even if it is effectively an annual in some locales.

## ***Ruellia elegans* 'Ragin' Cajun'**

Another new plant in my garden, *Ruellia elegans* 'Ragin' Cajun', was flowering when I bought it and never stopped blooming.

My plant was in full sun and even on the hottest days of summer, it thrived. By the end of August, it had reached about

3 feet in height and had grown into a multi-stemmed plant, similar to *Salvia guaranitica* 'Black and Blue'. With its constant scarlet flowers, it has been popular with hummingbirds. I would plant it again.



*Digiplexis*  
'Illumination Flame'



*Ruellia elegans*  
'Ragin' Cajun'

PHOTOS BY RICH BAER



*Salvia* 'Amistad'



*Pseudopanax ferox*



*Melianthus major*

even brought her plant into an unheated greenhouse and still lost it.

This year, Portland Nursery sold them as annuals. "However, with that said, it was worth every penny even if it

attraction in any garden center.

## ***Melianthus major***

*Melianthus major* is a foliage plant I would not go without in my garden. ►

## ▲ WHAT I'M HEARING

The jagged-toothed leaflets and grayish green color of the leaves make this a much-admired plant.

For its foliage alone, no other plant in my garden generates as much interest as *Melianthus major*. It has foot-long spikes of reddish brown flowers, but I grow it for the foliage.

This past winter was hard on many marginally cold-hardy plants. I thought my *Melianthus* didn't make it through, so I bought a new one in the spring. But as I was planting it, I discovered new plants emerging from the roots of the plant I thought was dead.

Now I have a large grouping of these plants and I am letting them spread.

### ***Pseudopanax ferox***

Of all the plants in my garden, this has to be one of the most unusual. Given to me by a friend several years

ago as a small stick with rigid leaves, it did not appear to be anything I would want to keep.

However, as it grew, it became more and more interesting, and now it is a 6-foot single-stem plant with rigid leaves that look and feel like metal. In fact, several people visiting our garden this past summer thought it was a fabricated piece of garden art!

The leaves are narrow (½ inch wide), up to 15 inches long with a somewhat serrated edge, and an odd color, dark avocado with a reddish-brown strip down the center.

I have heard that this is an ancient plant native to New Zealand, and that its growth pattern evolved in a unique way to cope with the ravenous feeding of the now-extinct flightless bird, the moa. Lower leaves begin like those on my plant, but after reaching a certain height,

the leaves change.

The story goes that the *Pseudopanax* waits until it is taller than the height of the moa to produce foliage that is more edible. I am anxious to see my plant reach the height when the leaves change.

### **What gets people talking?**

As I think back on my summertime visits with various groups, I wonder if garden center owners or nursery growers ever engage in the same reflective behavior. If not, it might be something to consider: it is an excellent way to discover what plants will appeal to gardeners and get people talking. ☺

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