



WITH A SMALL FOOTPRINT AND
MINIMAL UPKEEP, PINT-SIZED
PERENNIALS CAN YIELD KING-
SIZED REWARDS



By Lisa Albert

Without a doubt, current events impact the garden world. Resulting trends are often old fashions given new life.

For instance, this past spring, rising fuel and food costs increased demand for vegetable plants at retail garden centers. This 21st century trend has a decidedly 20th century antecedent – the famous victory gardens that Americans planted during World War II.

Similarly, gardeners in the postwar years were on the lookout for plants that required less labor and provided more enjoyment.

“After World War II, labor wasn’t readily available or cheap. Most of the men went into factory work so estate gardens didn’t have anyone to tend to and stake all the perennials,” explains John Caine, landscape garden designer for Joy Creek Nursery in Scappoose, Ore. “Alan Bloom, the father of the perennial movement, started looking for plants that you didn’t need to stake and that were easy to grow.”

Bloom looked to alpine plants as the answer but with new vision.

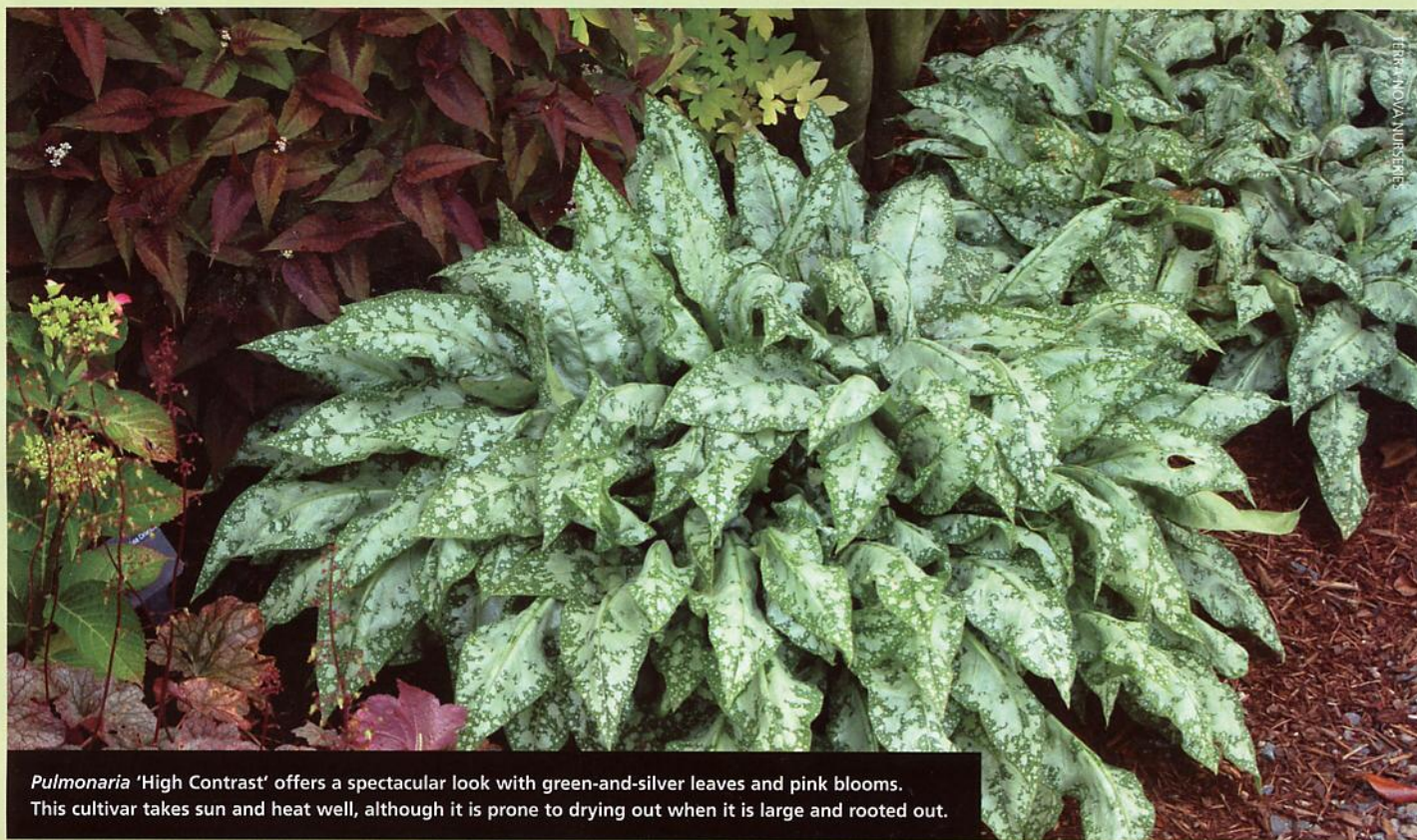


Small Statures: Perennials and groundcovers



THESE DIMINUTIVE
PLANTS DELIVER
BIG IN MORE WAYS
THAN ONE, AS THE
COUNTRY TRENDS
TOWARDS SMALLER
PROPERTIES

The incredible variety of available slow-growing perennials gives homeowners and landscapers many options, but according to John Caine of Joy Creek Nurseries, the retail customers often need to be educated. Once they "grow their plant vocabulary," they can create a garden that makes an eloquent statement. Good options shown here include *Tiarella* 'Sugar and Spice' (opposite, top), *Lavender* 'Thumbelina Leigh' (opposite, bottom), *Pulmonaria* 'Cotton Cool' (top left), *Tiarella* 'Pirate's Patch' (top right) and *Bergenia* 'Lunar Glow'.



Pulmonaria 'High Contrast' offers a spectacular look with green-and-silver leaves and pink blooms. This cultivar takes sun and heat well, although it is prone to drying out when it is large and rooted out.

Instead of using them in estate garden rockeries whose upkeep required a full retinue of professional gardeners, Bloom planted them in easy-to-maintain raised beds where they thrived and their elfin beauty could be admired at an easy glance.

That phenomenon, like vegetable gardening, is also newly resurgent. Low maintenance plants remain a clarion call for present-day gardeners. Alpine plants, low-growing perennials, and groundcovers meet that need as much today as they did mid-century.

"A lot of times when you talk alpenes, a lot of people start shuddering, thinking they are hard to grow," Caine said. "At Joy Creek, we push the concept of mixing (1/4-10) gravel into clay-based soil to break it up. It keeps plants from dying from root rot, which is often more of a problem than cold. You can use sand but you have to use equal amounts of sand ... most people don't want to use 6-8 inches of sand. You can use smaller amounts of gravel because it's a larger aggregate."

These diminutive plants deliver big in more ways than one, as the country trends towards smaller properties,

limiting past indulgences of borders designed to showcase only one season.

"If you're an avid plant collector and you don't have a lot of space, you go for dwarf and alpine plants," Caine said. "One of my customers uses the term 'choice.' She means it's a good selection, not a more aggressive plant."

Additionally, "alpine plants give you that really nice tapestry look," Caine said, "and you get more diversity (in a small space) so you have fewer problems with insects."

Keeping customers happy

David McCoy, co-owner of McCoy Family Nursery in North Plains, Ore., relies on garden center perennial buyers to know what home gardeners are demanding right now.

"(Perennial buyers) are my best source for what to grow," McCoy said. "They are the front line. They get the complaints ... (and) they tell me what's really good. It's just not practical for me to keep track of homeowners. It may put me behind the curve a year or two,

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Picks from the PROS

It isn't hard to get growers to talk about plants. The tough part is getting them to narrow down their list of favorites to just a handful. Here are some of the varieties our sources recommended:

Steve Taylor
Blooming Nursery, Inc.
Cornelius, Ore.

Halimocistus 'Merrist Wood Cream' – This dwarf, spreading evergreen shrub has large, soft, creamy-yellow flowers with crimson markings on the petals. It has gray-green leaves and prefers a sunny, well-drained location. It is particularly well adapted to the dry summers of the Pacific Northwest and blooms in late spring and early summer. Hardy through zone 7.



Euphorbia x martinii – This cultivar has the best bronze-red fall and winter color of any *Euphorbia*. It is a cross between *E. characias* and *E. amygdaloides* and resembles a dwarf form of *E. characias*. Chartreuse bracts appear from May to July above the evergreen foliage. Hardy to zone 7, it's drought tolerant, too.



Lavender 'Thumbelina Leigh' – This dwarf *Lavender* cultivar grows to only 6" tall! Dark violet flowers appear in summer and continue blooming into fall when deadheaded. The diminutive size is perfect for rock gardens and the front of the border. The flowers are just as large as any other *Lavender*, but they are presented on much shorter stems. Hardy through zone 5, it is drought tolerant and adapts well to the dry summers of the Pacific Northwest.



Helleborus hybridus 'Mardi Gras Party Dress' – These gorgeous hellebores have been in continual development by Charles Price over the past 20 years. It is a greatly improved strain of Lenten Rose with double flowers in a mix of white and pink colors, developed through meticulous hand pollination. The flowers bloom in winter in mild climates, and early spring in cold climates, and last for two months or more. But the evergreen, deer resistant foliage provides interest year-round. It is a very adaptable plant, tolerating a wide range of growing situations. It usually is planted in partial shade, but it can tolerate either full shade or full sun. In full sun, it may need some additional water during summer drought. Evergreen to zone 5, it is root hardy to zone 4.



Heuchera 'Hollywood' – This *Heuchera* has very dark, metallic-silver foliage that is slightly ruffled. From late spring through early summer, bright coral-hued flowers appear in profusion. It will even re-bloom when spent flowers are removed. It is rare to find a *Heuchera* these days where the flowers are just as colorful as the foliage, but this exceptional *Heuchera* is as colorful as Tinseltown itself. Hardy through zone 4.



John Caine
Joy Creek Nursery
Portland, Ore.

Heuchera 'Ginger Ale' – This *Heuchera* has yellow flowers and ginger, yellow leaves. Its shape is compact at 12 inches tall by 16 inches wide, with flower spikes reaching 22 inches tall. It grows well in morning sun to afternoon shade. Foliage gives a long season of color.



Pinellia tripartita 'Dragon Tails' – This plant combines gold splashed foliage with exotic "Jack-in-the-pulpit" flowers and grows to 8 inches tall, with flowers reaching up to 15 inches. It provides excellent contrast in the woodland garden.



Sanicula caerulea – This short, petite, woodland ground cover displays sky blue flowers over bronze-green foliage from summer through fall. It grows to 4 inches tall, with the flowers reaching 6 inches, and spreads to a foot wide.



Tiareella 'Jeepers Creeper'

– This creeper indeed makes an impact with bold marked green foliage and dark veins. It blooms large white flowers over an extended period if dead-headed. It clumps at about 2 feet wide and is about 7 inches tall. Its flower spikes reach 12 inches, and it takes shade to partial shade well.



Verbascum 'Sierra Sunset' – This long season bloomer offers bright pink flowers and deep red eyes. It takes full sun and excellent drainage as in a rock garden. It grows to 14 inches tall including the flowers – no more haircuts in June!



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but it also keeps me from making what I think are errors. If a plant is a good one, it will run for a number of years."

"There are several things people are looking for. One, they want a minimal amount of maintenance. That's huge. They also want minimal disease and insect problems, and something they don't have to water all the time."

McCoy knows that keeping the end customer happy keeps his customers happy. It's sound business practice to grow plants that will do well for home gardeners. McCoy offers many popular low-growing plants, including *Sempervivums* ("pest free as long as you don't get them too wet"), *Sedums*, *Pratia angulata* and *P. pedunculata* – "star creepers might need a little trimming if you take care of them too well" – *Saxifraga X urbium* 'London Pride' and *Waldsteinia fragarioides*.

Native plants in demand include *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi* 'Massachusetts' – "it is smaller leaved and branches better than the species" – *Sedum* 'Cape Blanco' and *Oxalis oregana*.

Meeting customer needs isn't enough. Dispelling customers' misunderstandings and myths of what plants can and cannot do is just as important.

"Some think, 'Oh, I can stick it in the garden and it will choke out weeds and I won't have to water it or feed it,'" McCoy said. "It will grow from this point to the edge of my driveway but it won't grow on my driveway." You know, the 'miracle plant.'" Such a plant doesn't exist. But one that McCoy grows as a result of recommendations comes close: heron's bill, *Erodium X variable*.

"*Erodium* is an awesome plant. It solves a multitude of problems. It blooms for a long time (late March to September). It doesn't need deadheading. I've never seen an aphid on it. It stays compact; it's slow-growing. It's bulletproof! For me, it's the perfect plant If I could find a whole selection of plants that perform like *Erodium* that have different shapes, colors and textures, man, I'd jump on that in a heartbeat."

Looking for the perfect plant

Everyone is searching for the next big thing – that miracle plant, if you will – even as plant fashions come and go.

"In the 1900s, many *Astilbe*, *Hosta*, and *Hemerocallis* cultivars were developed," explained Steve Taylor, sales manager for Blooming Nursery in Cornelius, Ore. German nurseryman Georg Arends was responsible for a lot of *Astilbe* breeding in the early part of last century. Few new varieties enter the market these days, however, the ones that do are markedly different.

"*Astilbe X arendsii* 'Color Flash' is a fairly new introduction with nice foliage color. There are also some purple-leaved *Astilbes* coming around. The trend is towards foliage color because that provides year-round color; flowers are so fleeting." It's also a compact variety; the foliage mounds to six inches tall, in bloom, it tops out about 10 to 12 inches in height.

Hosta and *Hemerocallis* continue to be bred but their popularity is waning, particularly in the Northeast and the Mid-Atlantic states.

"Deer are causing a lack of interest (from gardeners), particularly with hostas because they are the first things deer will eat," Taylor said. "We don't see this as much in the (densely populated) Portland area but where suburbs have larger properties and more of a woodland feel, people are planting fewer hostas."

Since 2000, plant fashion has shifted to *Heuchera*, *Pulmonaria*, and *Tiarella*. Taylor credits improved tissue culture techniques and efforts of breeders such as Terra Nova Nursery in Canby, Ore., for breakthroughs in these species. Tissue culture allows breeders to produce plants by the thousands very easily. But exciting things can happen when growers plant them in the field.

"You'll notice some kind of mutation ... (that) you wouldn't notice in



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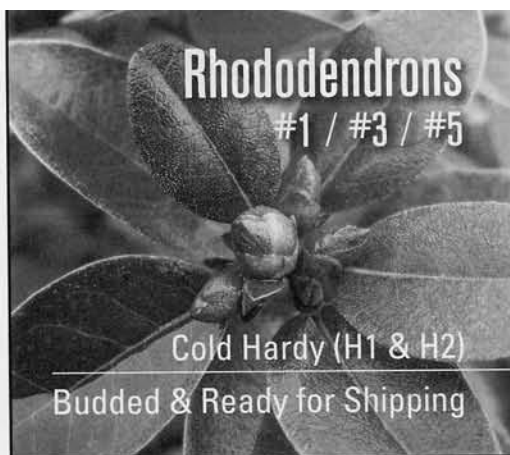
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the lab ... they really jump out. That's why Terra Nova is able to get so many forms of *Heuchera*. You can spot the (differences in) foliage color right away."

Occasionally, Blooming Nursery will discover new plants, such as *Geum* 'Mango Lassi', at the nursery, but generally they research what other growers are developing, selecting the most garden-worthy introductions to offer to their customers.

Low-growing garden-worthy plants don't have to be the latest thing to deserve a place in the landscape.

Low maintenance Blooming Nursery favorites include hardy geraniums, such as *Geranium X cantabrigiense* 'Biokovo', 'Karmina', 'St. Ola', and 'Cambridge Blue' and '*G. cinereum* 'Purple Pillow', sea thrift (*Armeria maritima* 'Powder Puff', 'Victor Reiter', 'Rubrifolia', Dusseldorf and 'Vindictive'), *Phlox stolonifera*, and dwarf mondo grass (*Ophiopogon japonicus* varieties). One plant with remarkable staying power is *Lithodora diffusa* 'Grace Ward'.

"Not only is it evergreen, but its flowers are cobalt blue. That's just not a color that you find very often in nature. It's a great plant where it can be grown," Taylor said.

It's also popular with McCoy's customers; even for those where it is not cold hardy. They will buy it and use it as an annual because of its vivid blue flowers. Another favorite blue-flowered groundcover is *Ceratostigma plumbaginoides*.

"It's a fall bloomer with electric blue flowers and gorgeous fall color. It's late to appear in spring so maybe that's why it's not used as much, but man, this is a killer plant."

Sedums, sempervivums and ice plant (*Delosperma* sp.) are excellent choices for tucking into rock walls or growing on green roofs. The latter is a largely untapped market niche. Blooming Nursery offers LiveRoof modules for commercial buildings. The planted plastic modules connect togeth-

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er and transform a roof in about a day. The residential green roof movement is still in its infancy. Retail garden center customers generally stick to small DIY projects such as shed roofs.

Bringing it all back home

Having a wealth of plant choices is a plus but offering design guidance makes it even better.

At Joy Creek, "Our customers have a vision, they have an idea what they want, but they have no idea how to go about it," Caine said. So, he encourages them to grow their plant vocabulary.

"That's a term I learned from Lucy (Hardiman, garden designer, educator, and writer in Portland, Ore.)," he said. "Plant vocabulary is how you use



Pulmonaria 'Cotton Cool' is another pulmonaria variety with attractive leaves. This one generates plenty of blue blooms starting around April.

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plants ... to tell a story in your garden. If you only know 35 plants, well, you can't create very interesting sentences with only 35 words."

Few gardens are too small to make room for these Lilliputian-sized plants. Their uses are as varied as the choices.

Caine, who has a background in culinary training, also likes to use food analogies.

"To help people understand something new, relate it to something they know," he said. "We all know food. The flowers are the frosting on the cake but who wants to eat just frosting? I want the frosting to be on something that is really nice.

"Mix your textures – coarse with fine, add a little bit of medium – use green leaves with yellow, with blue, with silver. Mix foliage size and color. Put silver foliaged pussytoes (*Antennaria rosea*) next to a dark green or maroon foliaged plant. *Bergenia* 'Lunar Glow' would be delicious with blue fescue or blue oat grass."

Follow his advice and in the end, "Your exterior spaces (will) feed your soul," he said.

Few gardens are too small to make room for these Lilliputian-sized plants. Their uses are as varied as the choices: rock gardens, rock walls, edge paths, green roofs, and mixed borders. And your customers won't need a crew of groundskeepers to keep them looking their best. ☺

Lisa Albert is a freelance garden writer based in Tualatin, Ore. Her work has been featured in Sunset magazine. Contact her at lja.garden@verizon.net or visit her Web site at www.lisaalbertwriter.com.

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