



Old Fashioned Favorites for Today's Gardens

Old fashioned doesn't mean out of fashion when it comes to plants. Old favorites abound in today's gardens because they still have the qualities that made them favorites in the first place. Color, texture, fragrance, taste, or unusual features continue to appeal, from one generation to the next.

Some plants, most notably roses, have been cherished by nearly every generation in recorded history. According to the University of Illinois Extension Service, roses have been cultivated for 5,000 years. A favorite of hybridizers, new shrub rose varieties are introduced every year and are ideal for today's busy gardeners. The best known low-maintenance shrub roses are Knock Out and related varieties.

Other plants fall in and out of favor. Numerous plants favored in Victorian gardens and then forgotten are being rediscovered by today's gardeners.

Canna, the intrepid summer bloomer that graced the center of many stately Victorian circle beds, appeals to modern gardeners with its tropical appearance. Named varieties like 'Yellow Futurity' and 'Durban' boast remarkable multicolored foliage under brightly colored flowers.



Other choice foliage plants with excellent colors and textures include Persian Shield in purples, plecranthus in greens, silver and white, and coleus in pretty much every color except blue. New varieties come out every year, expanding the old fashioned palette with exciting new colors and patterns.

The dianthus family continues to charm with sweet spicy-scented flowers. Biennial Sweet William is a great self-sowing staple of cottage gardens. Perennial pinks range from low cushion types to those upright and suitable for cutting. Popular in Victorian gardens circa 1890 were heliotrope and stock, two wonderfully fragrant plants for spring and early summer. Grow modern stock 'Sugar and Spice Mix' for its double flowers and outstanding spicy scent.



Hosta, the workhorse of the shade garden was traditionally known as funkia, prompting one vintage, tongue-in-cheek line drawing of an anthropomorphic, unmistakably depressed blue funkia. Old favorites often have endearing names: Sweet Pea, Morning Glory, Love-in-a-Puff, Sweet William.

Brandywine tomato, with its lumpy bumpy shape is no beauty by today's grocery-store standards but gardeners continue to seek it out because it just plain tastes great.

Brandywine is readily available as seed or as transplants in most garden centers. Look for other old fashioned favorite tomato varieties as well.

For old fashioned root veggies, plant beets. Baby beet leaves are a delicious and nutritious addition to salads. Heirloom variety 'Bulls Blood' develops into candy-striped flavorful roots. Beet plants make striking, edible companions for nasturtiums and calendula in the mixed garden.



Use old-fashioned flowers to attract hummingbirds. Guaranteed to bring in the hummers are Columbine, Foxglove, Larkspur, Red Cypress Vine and Red Texas sage.

Old favorites are also making appearances in backyard evening gardens. White flowers reflect ambient light at night and fill the air with soft fragrance. Three of the best to use as annuals include Datura, white Jasmine and Flowering Tobacco.

Today's average garden differs from vintage gardens in size, soil quality, available time, and an over-reliance on chemicals. Plant breeders are working to introduce new versions of old favorites that fit into our modern space and lifestyle and that are naturally productive and resistant to disease.

Favorites of gardeners become favorites of plant breeders and hybridizers, who are some of the world's most avid gardeners. Breeders see a unique quality in one individual plant among dozens or thousands and begin the laborious process of bringing that one individual plant or quality forward into cultivation. Thus, serviceable but dull blue Funkia becomes the enduring favorite Hosta 'Elegans' and then Hosta 'Great Expectations'.

Upscale breeding and selection brings modern cultivars to market. They complement but do not always upstage older seed strains and varieties. While great new choices come from modern selections, some things can be lost. One notable case in point: fragrance in modern rose varieties. Plants with staying power generation after generation are often pleasantly fragrant. In the case of roses, fragrance is sometimes lost in the quest for disease resistance or better flower form and color. Cover all bases by planting a mix of old and new species and cultivars.

One note regarding the use of chemical pre-emergent weed controls in the flower or vegetable bed: pre-emergents, like insecticides or herbicides, are not very selective in what they affect. Hand-pull weeds as they appear and put away the pre-emergent if you want to see your old-fashioned flowers produce their own seedlings every year.



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