

Heuchera: a great garden perennial for the Ozarks

I have always found *Huechera americana* and other heuchera (pronounced Hoy-ker-uh) species fascinating. In their native habitat, these little plants seemed to grow out of solid rock; clinging to the surface of towering bluffs along the rivers with little or no soil present. Being able to survive such harsh, seemingly unlivable habitats makes huechera perfect for lightly shaded rock gardens.

According to George Yatskievych, Director of the Flora of Missouri Project with the Missouri Botanical Garden, there are four main species of heuchera native to Missouri. Two of which, *H. Americana* and *H. villosa*, are commonly used in the breeding of new hybrid heuchera cultivars available at local garden centers.

One of the great U.S. native plants used to create fascinating hybrid garden perennials, it seems like every day a new cultivar of huechera is released to the market; each one more beautiful than the next.

In recent years, plant breeders have taken five main native North American species of huecheras including *H. saguinarea* native to Arizona and noted for its flower color and drought tolerance, *H. americana* for its heat and cold tolerance, *H. villosa* for its heat and humidity tolerance, etc., and hybridized them to produce plants with amazing foliage and blooms. In the Ozark climate most heuchera should be planted in light shade; protected from harsh direct afternoon sun. Some of the lighter colored leaf hybrids require full shade; always pay attention to the care tag to determine the requirements of your specific cultivar.

Many cultivars of heucheras are drought tolerant, and relatively disease and pest free, though powdery mildew and rust can present problems with warm temperatures and high humidity.¹² Most of the new cultivars are susceptible to frost heaving, a condition where the soil expands upward with the formation of ice crystals and rips the roots of the plants out of the ground and upon thawing, leave the uprooted plants above the soil exposed to the elements.³ This is common



¹ <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7493.html>

² http://plantpathology.uark.edu/Number_4-2012.pdf

³ <http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/gardens-gardening/your-garden/help-for-the-home-gardener/advice-tips-resources/pests-and-problems/environmental/winter-injury/frost-heaving.aspx>

in heavy clay soils, and proper incorporation of organic matter to the soil as well as winter mulching will help prevent this winter dieback.

Heucheras prefer a soil pH of 5.8-6.2, well-drained average moisture soil. From experience heuchera appreciates being planted in a raised bed, and makes excellent rock garden plants, often spreading by seed to random rock crevices in a garden setting.

Besides having minimal growth requirements, heuchera is a great plant tolerant of growing under black walnut trees; apparently immune to the allelopathic (inhibits the growth of nearby plants) effects of the chemical juglones produced by all parts of the tree.⁴

Heuchera ‘Palace Purple:’ Of all heuchera cultivars and strains out on the market, I prefer this old standby. I grew up with this particular variety of *H. micrantha*.⁵ Back in the early 1990’s the original plants were purchased, eventually forming a solid mat of bronze purple maple shaped leaves, standing about 1-2 feet tall. Even after being scorch by last year’s drought and heat, and enduring deer damage, these plants have come back in full force this spring, seemingly unscathed. This particular strain of heuchera is pretty pest and disease free, having never had any diseases on these plants to speak of over the past 15 years. Unfortunately, deer do love the foliage of heuchera, and adequate protection should be made to prevent deer from foraging on this apparently tasty “salad green.”⁶

Heuchera Americana:

This great native species of heuchera is perfect for Ozark landscapes. Early spring red tinged foliage deepens to a lush green. This is another heuchera which has been growing in my garden since 2010, surviving many weather extremes without much care.⁷



***Heuchera americana* is a perfect for rock gardens.**

A few other heuchera hybrids have been tested out local Dent County and Phelps County Master Gardeners. Harriet, a Phelps County Master Gardener, has grown the red flowering ‘Hercules’ with success. Her plants survived the drought of 2012 in her garden. Jean, a Dent County Master

⁴ <http://www.mortonarb.org/tree-plant-advice/article/887/plants-tolerant-of-black-walnut-toxicity.html>

⁵ Dr. Allan Armitage. “Herbaceous Perennial Plants” University of Georgia.

⁶ <http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/gardens-gardening/your-garden/plant-finder/plant-details/kc/d240/heuchera-micrantha-var.-diversifolia-palace-purple.aspx>

⁷ <http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/gardens-gardening/your-garden/plant-finder/plant-details/kc/k460/heuchera-americana.aspx>

Gardener has grown in more full sun ‘Amethyst Mist’ and ‘Black Current’ both purple leaf heuchera cultivars in her garden.⁸

This year I decided to splurge and conduct a variety trial on a few interesting cultivars from Terra Nova Nurseries. They have produced so many fascinating varieties with colorful foliage and flowers over the years. I am testing out ‘Autumn Leaves,’ a reddish cast maple leaf variety with both *H. americana* and *H. villosa* genetics bred for heat and humidity tolerance, and ‘Lipstick’, with drought tolerant *H. americana* genetics noted for red blooming spikes throughout the summer.⁹

Heuchera, preferably cultivars from the native species *H. villosa* and *H. americana* breeding stock, are perfect for an Ozark garden.^{10 11 12}

⁸ <http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/gardens-gardening/your-garden/plant-finder/plant-details/kc/d798/heuchera-hercules.aspx>

⁹ http://www.terravanurseries.com/gardeners/heuchera-c-82_23.html

¹⁰ http://www.ngb.org/year_of/index.cfm?YOID=31

¹¹ <http://web.extension.illinois.edu/dmp/palette/090503.html>

¹² <http://www.caes.uga.edu/extension/cobb/anr/Documents/HEUCHERA.pdf>