



Touched with color

Variegated plants add variety and texture to gardens

One of plants that are trending include *Caladium* plants mixed with reds and *Colocasia* like the Waikiki variety with purple, yellow and green all on the same leaf. PHOTO COURTESY MCHUTCHISON INC.

BY EMILY LINDBLOM

HEUCHERAS WERE ONCE KNOWN for their flowers. Now, they're regarded for their flashy foliage in different shades of red, purple and yellow.

Dan Heims, president of **Terra Nova Nurseries Inc.** in Canby, Oregon, is known for introducing many variegated plants to the market, including variegated *Heuchera*.

"I've always had a fascination with variegated plants," Heims said. "If I have two plants in front of me, one variegated and one not, I go for the variegated one."

His 50 years of experience in horticulture started with an interest in organic gardening out of high school. He went on to supply plants for the interiors of the University of Oregon's buildings, then a

business selling indoor plants at the first Saturday market in Portland. He specialized in stunning foliage plants like *Calathea*.

"I had my own property, and our greenhouse was bigger than our house," Heims said. "I joined an indoor light gardening society and that's where I met my future business partner."

As the house plant market shifted, he had to change careers to landscape design with Terra Green Landscape Company, which he started in 1979 and continued for 20 years designing, building and maintaining landscapes. In the last three years of running Terra Green, he started a second business, Terra Nova, working 16-hour days between the two.

He focused his selection on exciting

foliage, including *Hosta* and *Heuchera*.

Hardy *Heuchera* plants can survive on the tops of mountains, in the arctic circle and in warm subtropical regions.

"They can be crossed and work in all ranges," Heims said. "Early on I found one gold sport off a purple ruffle heuchera, and that one variegated piece led to our whole palette," Heims said. "If any *Heuchera* has a ruffle, that started with us."

Finding new variations

Since then, Heims' company has introduced 1,200 new variations of plants to horticulture. Terra Nova has a 15-acre research facility in Canby and sells plants across the globe, including England, Japan and China.

"We work with several Chinese >>>

Touched with color

companies and one of them buys our plants and puts them in a forest setting and charges for people to walk through the forest,” Heims said.

Terra Nova uses tissue culture labs in Indonesia, Germany, Costa Rica and Poland, as well as farms in Kenya and Guatemala that grow plants from cuttings.

“One of the most exciting parts of my job is to go to other countries on a plant collecting tour,” he said. He recently brought back 50 plants from Japan and 300 plants from Thailand.

“One out of 10,000 plants, seedlings or tissue, there is some difference or variegation,” Heims said. “I like to walk entire greenhouses and there are one or two that pop out, and I call that sport fishing,” he joked.

After testing the plants for 3–5 years to ensure they’re stable and multipliable in tissue culture, the company speculates how many plants to sell. Heims said \$1 million per year is spent to support testing in labs



Heuchera 'Forever Purple' is one of the colorful varieties developed at Terra Nova. PHOTO COURTESY TERRA NOVA NURSERIES INC

to ensure the variegation is consistent.

“If the plants are too variable, it is hard to sell them,” Heims said.

When the variegated plants are tested and found to be stable, they sell for more than the original version of the plant

would. Heims said a philodendron could go for \$16, but a variegated version could be up to \$600.

Heims said the industry is seeing a “house plant boom 2.0” in which tissue culture is making it easier for plant producers to sell plants at accessible prices.

“For example, the [*Monstera deliciosa* ‘Thai Constellation’] up until last year would sell for \$1,500 for an eight-inch pot, and we were able to put it into tissue culture and crank them out at a reasonable price,” Heims said.

Variegation adds value

When he started his career in the 1970s, *Alocasia* plants could go for \$100, but now tissue culture has brought the price down. Heims added that tissue culture adds vitality to a plant.

“It’s more like a seedling than a cutting of a plant and they surprise people with how quickly they grow, with no fungus and no disease,” Heims said. “It’s pretty darn cool.”

Monrovia Nursery Company is one of Terra Nova’s customers.

Heims said home plant growers who come across an extraordinary variegation in their plant are welcome to reach out to Terra Nova to see if it could become the next new variety.

Mark Leichty, director of business development at **Little Prince of Oregon Nursery** in Aurora, Oregon, said he’s always been fascinated with variegated plants.

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Heliopsis helianthoides 'Sunstruck' has bright yellow flowers and eye-catching variegated foliage.
PHOTO COURTESY BALL SEED

"They sell well and are beautiful and add a richness of color into a landscape," Leichty said. "I think different colors are really what lead the eye around a landscape. If every plant was just one particular hue of green, it would not be an interesting landscape. So when a plant produces different foliage and textures, it offers a different reference for our eyes to move around."

He said the same can be said for having this variety in a houseplant collection. He said some exciting examples are 'Pink Princess' philodendron with its pink and red foliage and variegated monstera, like the 'Thai Constellation'.

"They're highly prized by collectors so they're worth a lot of money," Leichty said. A straight green monstera could sell for 25 dollars, but the same plant with variegation could sell for six hundred to \$1,000.

Almost two decades ago, when he co-owned Fry Road Nursery in Albany, Oregon, he introduced a variegated *Phygelius rectus* 'Lemon Spritzer' PP24294, named for its yellow leaves with green dots.

"It may still be the first and only variegated *Phygelius* plant and it started with a random sport," Leichty said. "It was found through observation of one plant that popped up in propagation, and it was variegated, and it turned out to be stable."

He's been at Little Prince for the past 10 years growing many different variegated plants especially the last few years.

"When Covid started and houseplants became popular, we began propagating and bringing in many different varieties of variegated plants," Leichty said. "There are many people out there trying to alter the genetics of plants, but we're not trying to do that. We simply observe for random mutations and then try to propagate them and see if they're stable."

After years of propagating the plants to make sure they're stable, Little Prince can send them to a tissue culture lab to multiply them much more rapidly.

Massy Sanaei has been involved her whole career in research and development of different foliage and colors, starting with Costa Farms for 12 years. She's been at **Ball FloraPlant** for the last five



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Echeveria glauca 'Compton Carousel' is a sought-after variegated succulent. PHOTO COURTESY TERRA NOVA NURSERIES INC

years, where she is the product launch and assortment manager in charge of vegetative development for colors.

She and her team receive the new plants from breeders, work on development of the products, then present them to the sales and marketing team.

Sanaei said one of the most exciting variegated plants is *Coleus*, which adds color to an otherwise green houseplant palette.

“With the new development of everybody having houseplants, it’s either green, or green and white there is not much color, so coleus adds a nice purple color and shades of purple and red,” Sanaei said. “There’s a lot of interest in shade items that don’t need direct sunlight. You can find four to five colors in the leaf for coleus, so a lot of breeders are working on that. They also last for a long time.”

She added the trend is not only about variegation, but also about the usefulness of plants.

“The main purpose is to have plants not only as ornamentals, but also to have a use for them, including herbs for food or aromatherapy,” Sanaei said. “So those are different things we’re considering in breeding.”

Sanaei said the houseplant industry is still seeing an uptick when compared to 2019, but it’s starting to slow down since the peak of the Covid pandemic.

“In the early years of Covid, a lot of even non-plant lovers started having plants in their house because they bring joy and happiness to people,” she said. “They weren’t doing anything else, so they started gardening and having plants in their house, but we’ve seen the market slowing down lately.”

Social media has been a popular way for people to be introduced to new variations of plants and spread houseplant trends.

Lately, she said people have been looking for plants that are variegated but also compact for small spaces.

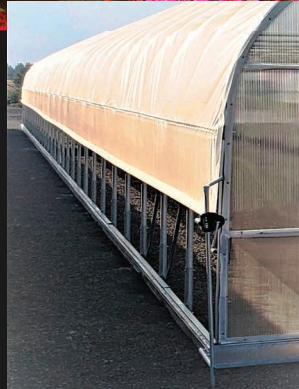
“With space being one of the issues with houses not being affordable, we are also working on varieties that are more compact for outside or inside,” Sanaei said. “We’ve begun working on micro-coleus.” She said coleus are usually large plants, but Ball FloraPlant has been working on developing smaller versions to meet that need.

Sarah Greenwood, global product development manager at **Darwin Perennials**, has 13 years of experience in the trial process of getting new plants into the market.

“We trial plant material in containers and in the ground and evaluate their performance all along a product life cycle, so we know what shelf life to expect when it goes to retail,” Greenwood said. “And we’re looking at garden landscape performance to know how it is going to perform for the final end user.”

Greenwood works with her team >>

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to test if a plant variety will hold a stable variegation as it is propagated over at least three to five years.

Darwin Perennials has its own internal breeders who send the code for new plants over to Greenwood's team, then after the trial process, the sales and marketing team works with customers to bring it to market.

"It's a big team effort," Greenwood said.

Some highlights from her program include *Brunnera macrophylla* 'Frostbite' PP35059, with a silver green pattern, and a white and green ground cover sedum called what a doozy, and *heliopsis* sun-struck. Darwin Perennials also produced two variegated grasses, one called bandwidth and the other high frequency.

Another of Greenwood's favorites is a *Polemonium pulcherrima* called 'Golden Feathers'.

"It's a really pretty one and works

in the shade which is nice as well," Greenwood said.

She said variegated plants add value to a houseplant collection with their different colors and shades, even after a plant has stopped blooming for the season.

"When it's not in full bloom, the interesting foliage is still eye-catching so as long as the stability is consistent throughout the supply chain, that value added to the product still resonates," Greenwood said.

Forecasting trends

With 20 years of experience in the gardening industry, Allison Pennell, horticultural sales representative at **McHutchison Inc.**, sells plants to vendors in the Pacific Northwest and Idaho.

"I help people decide what plants to grow and I follow trends and the different directions in the industry," Pennell said. "I'm already studying the new plants that are

going to be available in 2025. Those plants have been in trials and production with different growers for many years beforehand."

She said one trend she's seeing is a rise in people adding variegated foliage into their pots of annuals to create a unique combination, such as variegated *Pothos* in a pot of petunias.

"I've seen more diversity and creativity in what can be in a combination," Pennell said. "I've seen a lot more growers embracing *Colocasia*, *Alocasia*, and *Caladium* and integrating them into spring annual combinations." She said the independent garden centers she worked with can get creative in their combinations.

Some plants that are trending include *Caladium* plants mixed with reds and *Colocasia* like the Waikiki variety with purple, yellow and green all on the same leaf.

"From a grower or garden center perspective, anytime they're bringing in something new, they're taking a bit of a risk," Pennell said. She uses her observations and experience to help discern what will perform well in the market to minimize this risk.

"Variegation can sometimes be unstable so it's helpful to see it for a season or two because if it's unstable, it will go back to its main color," Pennell said.

She added that plant trends also follow fashion and interior design trends of other consumer goods, so she stays on top of those too.

Pennell said variegated foliage can help extend a garden center's season for offering colorful plants.

"You have a lot more flexibility because you can't grow flowers and sell hanging baskets in November, but you can sell variegated plants so it has helped to get people in the garden center between peak seasons," Pennell said. ☺

Emily Lindblom is an Oregon-based freelance journalist covering business, environmental and agricultural news. She has a background in community reporting and a master's degree in multimedia journalism. Visit her website at EmilyLindblom.com or reach her at Emily@EmilyLindblom.com.



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