



# *Echinacea*



# explosion

From left: Monrovia's Double Scoop™ Raspberry Deluxe, Terra Nova's 'Sweet Sandia' and Terra Nova's 'CARA MIA™ Seashell'. PHOTOS COURTESY OF MONROVIA NURSERY AND TERRA NOVA NURSERIES INC.

## Breeders respond to rising demand with a dazzling array of new varieties

BY ERICA BROWNE GRIVAS

**E**chinaceas' popularity seems boundless. The iconic native plant with star appeal has become the emblem of the pollinator gardening movement, and the cultivars just keep coming, with expanding colors, habit and forms. Which are worth adding to your roster?

### A bumpy road to success

There are many reasons to grow *Echinacea*, aka purple coneflowers. With direct sun and well-drained soil, they'll offer large summer blooms with nectar for bees and butterflies and cones that persist

into winter — if the goldfinches don't get them first.

It's not surprising, then, that decades ago, breeders saw the possibilities in this showy prairie plant boasting a trademark cone at the center of an outsized, sometimes fragrant, daisy-type flower and a long bloom period. The two marketplace stalwarts of purple coneflower were *E. purpurea* 'Magnus,' a lilac-leaning pink, and 'White Swan.'

'Magnus' was named Perennial Plant of the Year in 1998.

"If you go back 25-30 years ago, there were essentially two *Echinacea* available, and they were both *purpurea*," said Dan Heims, co-owner of **Terra Nova Nurseries Inc.**, a wholesale nursery in Canby, Oregon that is a leader in *Echinacea* breeding. "They were offered in a gallon pot typi- ➤

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Facing page top to bottom: Terra Nova's 'FRESCO™ Apricot' and 'DARK SHADOWS™ 'Wicked'. PHOTOS COURTESY OF TERRA NOVA NURSERIES INC.

cally growing 3–4 feet tall and had 3–5 flowers per plant. That was it.”

Times have certainly changed. Responding to rising demand, breeders have created a dazzling array of double-flowered, dwarf, and bi-color varieties in red, yellow, orange, raspberry, white, green and combinations thereof.

The echinacea explosion was kicked off in the early aughts with 'Razzmatazz', a double-flowered selection from the Netherlands in 2003 and *Echinacea* 'Art's Pride' Orange Meadowbrite™ the first orange -rayed coneflower, introduced by Dr. James Ault through the Chicago Botanic Garden's breeding program in 2004.

Grace Dinsdale, founder of **Blooming Nursery** in Cornelius, Oregon, said of 'Art's Pride', "It was a huge uproar across the horticultural community; it was a great color breakthrough. Then the breeding took off — everybody started working on them," she said. "There's been an amazing proliferation of colors, heights and types. It's been wonderful to watch. At this point the competition is intense."

Although *Echinacea* is one of Blooming's top-selling genera, keeping them in stock is difficult — it can only fit two crops in within a short window.

"We overwinter a crop, we can sell through week 20 and do a spring crop after that and need to plant that fall crop within seven weeks of the week 20," said Dinsdale. Supply issues are also not uncommon.

In fact, Dinsdale said "We've discontinued more than we are growing." Since 2004, Blooming has grown and/or trialed about 157 varieties, Dinsdale said, with 55 active varieties as of December 2024.

However, not all varieties performed alike, especially in the early years of breeding. Many gardeners were disappointed with some of the first new echinaceas. Heims said they rushed to try these exciting new colors, often paying "crazy prices" to find they failed to overwinter due to weak necks or basal growth, or they succumbed to highly contagious "aster yellows." Soon growers and gardeners became leery of experimenting with the latest new *Echinacea*. How have breeders mastered this hurdle? >>

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Above: 'DELIGHTFUL Gold' from Terra Nova. Facing page from top: Monrovia Double Scoop™ Watermelon Deluxe and Sunseekers™ Golden Sun. PHOTOS COURTESY OF TERRA NOVA NURSERIES INC. AND MONROVIA NURSERY

### Modern-day *Echinacea* varieties

Thinking of the first rounds of breeding, “The plants were frankly horrible compared to what they are today,” said Heims.

Going beyond relying on *purpurea* to introduce a mix of *Echinacea* species (there are nine in all) into the breeding helped create stronger, longer-blooming, more resilient and disease-resistant plants, Heims said.

Some gave resistance to aster yellows, others improved the habit or flower power, like *Echinacea tenesseeensis*, which enabled the first cultivars to produce sprays rather than single stalks, Heims said.

Terra Nova’s 12-person breeding committee is continually trialing new varieties. “By using different species, we can give a range for all different purposes. We have dwarf types for the front of the border, virtually a blooming groundcover, to upright mid-landscape, and tall ones some that even function as a cut flower at 36 inches tall.”

Fun fact: while some echinacea flowers naturally reflex or droop their petals, Heims’s researchers select for a 15-degree angle, which he said looks cheerful and is optimal for visibility.

Among newer cultivars, Heims said, “We’ve had 100 flowers on a plant, and we’ve extended bloom until frost rather than just three weeks to a month. Now the

plants are better through breeding for having more shoots, which translates to more flowers and better winter resistance.”

With the rise of double-flowered *Echinacea* varieties, concern rose that the fluffy blooms would fail to support pollinators. “They were sterile,” he said, “which meant they bloom like crazy and continue to bloom but have no pollen or nectar or seeds for goldfinches.”

In response, Terra Nova released ‘FRESCO Apricot,’ a double flower which retains a full cone.

Georgia Clay is the plant selections manager at **Monrovia Nursery**, a California wholesale nursery with its largest farm in Dayton, Oregon. She’s seen changes in what consumers want from *Echinacea*.

“Consumers are looking for showy flowers with longer bloom periods, bright bold colors, and interesting new forms,” she said. “They are also looking for plants that are going to perform well in the garden. They want plants that do not flop or need to be staked, stay compact, and have increased resistance to diseases like leaf spot and powdery mildew.”

In just the last few years, Clay said, “We are seeing a color explosion with brighter and bolder flowers that are fading less throughout the season, flowers that change color throughout the lifecycle of the bloom, even the cones are adding color with bright oranges and greens. »

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Facing page top to bottom: Monrovia's SunSeekers™ 'White Perfection' and Panama™ Red. PHOTOS COURTESY OF MONROVIA NURSERY

Not only are the flowers getting more colorful, but they are also getting much more plentiful. We are seeing a huge amount of flowers at once as well as plants beginning to flower earlier and continuing to flower later into the fall.”

Even with those improvements, Clay added, “The biggest breakthrough in breeding we have seen in the last year or two is in the overall structure of the plants. We are seeing branching from the base of the plant, giving us significantly sturdier plants with strong stems and compact, rounded habits. *Echinacea* can get leggy and tall and the new breeding coming out is making huge leaps to remedy that issue.”

#### Hot, hot hot — new and old favorites

At **Moana Nursery** in Canby, Oregon, which grows *Echinacea* mainly for its garden centers in Nevada, Joe Dula said demand remains steady, with hot colors being the most popular. In the ‘Kismet’ series, Moana is planning to offer the red, yellow and orange for 2025 as well as ‘Pow Wow Wildberry,’ a consistent top seller.

Some of Dinsdale’s favorites include ‘Flame Thrower,’ ‘Hot Papaya,’ ‘Tangerine Dream,’ the Sombrero® series, the newer SunSeekers™ series, and ‘Meadow Mama’ varieties. Don’t discount classics ‘Magnus’ and ‘White Swan,’ either, she noted. “Those still sell like crazy,” she said, partially because they can market them in smaller pots.

Georgia Clay said Monrovia is excited to offer the Sunmagic Vintage series and the SunSeekers™ series in 2025. “Every year we trial hundreds of *Echinacea* and these two collections really stood out. The Sunmagic series stood out for their outstanding habits — well branched and rounded even without pinching — and the flower power. They produced a large number of flowers at once and kept the show going throughout the whole summer and into the fall. The Sunseekers series stands out due to their amazing flower power and semi-double flower forms that are unlike anything else currently being offered.” >>

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Heims called out 'CARA MIA™ Seashell', which he said can put out 60 flowers from a single plug, 'DARK SHADOWS™ Wicked' for vivid pink flowers against dark stems, 'Sweet Sandia' a pink/green bicolor, the reliable KISMET® series, and compact 'DELIGHTFUL Gold' for containers, while holding a soft spot for 'FRESCO™ Apricot's unique form and color.

### The latest trial

The Chicago Botanic Garden, which has been trialing coneflowers since 1993, recently released a new report based on a 52-taxa trial conducted from 2019–2023. While summer irrigated and mulched, the plants were not winter mulched, dead-headed or fertilized. The ratings (with a new four-star maximum, a change from previous studies' five) evaluated five specimens of each taxa for flower production and floral display quality, foliage and habit quality, plant health and vigor, winter survivability, and plant persistence or longevity. Pollinator-attraction was not assessed.

Interestingly, while *E. purpurea* is known to live as few as two or three years, these modern cultivars with complex breeding seem to have more staying power. "Our results showed that nearly 50% of coneflowers had good survival for at least the five-year span of the trial," the study stated. "14 taxa had complete survival of the five plants to fall 2023."

Also, of the ones that failed to overwinter, "the preponderance" lacked robust basal growth, reinforcing the importance of strong crowns going into winter.

Cultivars receiving the highest rating were: 'Cheyenne Spirit', 'Glowing Dream', KISMET® Raspberry, KISMET® White, 'Mellow Yellows', 'Sensation Pink', SOMBRERO® Blanco, SOMBRERO® Flamenco Orange, and SOMBRERO® Tres Amigos. ©

*Erica Browne Grivas is an award-winning journalist and gardener pushing zone boundaries in Seattle, Washington. She can be reached at [EBGrivas@gmail.com](mailto:EBGrivas@gmail.com).*