

No work, all reward

These low-maintenance *Nandina* selections offer gorgeous color and year-round interest in a variety of shapes and sizes

By Elizabeth Petersen

Nandina domestica has been esteemed by the cultures of eastern Asia for centuries. As a symbol of good fortune, the unassuming, but delicately beautiful, shrub (pictured) was planted on temple grounds, earning it the nickname “heavenly bamboo.”

Today, the useful, carefree plant is popular among designers and gardeners, who appreciate its year-round display of fine, colorful foliage, its dense, compact habit and its enduring nature. It is a monotypic genus, with this species as its only member.

This one-of-a-kind landscape staple is not a true bamboo; rather, it is an upright, evergreen shrub that sends

up multiple stems from the roots. Compound leaves stay on the plant year-round and show off a variety of colors as the seasons change.

In spring, fresh red foliage joins older green leaves that are accented later by white flower clusters. These develop into clusters of berries that gradually ripen to red and accompany the fall show of vibrant foliage. Both foliage and berries persist through winter, working to brighten gray days and decorate holiday tables.

In recent years, growers have selected a number of natural variations of the reliable species. These selections offer smaller, brighter, denser options and expand potential uses for the plant. In addition, varieties that don't flower or berry are desirable, especially in the southeastern U.S., where the species is now considered invasive.

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▲ NANDINA

Grown in Oregon

"We sell lots of nandina," said Pam Snodgrass, owner of P&D Nursery in Tualatin, Ore. "Nandina is very popular because it is so versatile: it provides year-round color, adapts to full sun or part shade and is available in a range of sizes, from fairly tall to very compact."

Snodgrass is optimistic about this year and next, and has stepped up production of nandinas.

"We can't grow enough nandina and often sell out of the most popular selections," Snodgrass said. P&D Nursery supplies local landscapers and independent garden centers in the Pacific Northwest.

P&D Nursery roots its own cuttings, plants them in 4-inch pots and then moves them up to #1, #2 and #5 sizes. Taller, upright selections don't branch as readily as dwarf varieties, so it is harder to produce lush, full plants in larger sizes, Snodgrass said. The #5's are in high demand, though.

'Moyer's Red,' for instance, is the tallest variety grown by P&D Nursery (6 to 8 feet by 18 to 36 inches). The finely textured shrub, P&D's second biggest seller, is popular for bright red spring foliage, glossy green summer foliage and reddish purple fall color. Because it has an upright habit with cane-like stems, it branches less readily.

As a result, P&D puts one 4-inch plant in a #1, two to three 4-inch plants in a #2 and three to four 4-inch plants in a #5.

Dwarf 'Gulf Stream,' the smallest nandina grown by P&D, is the best seller. More upright compared to 'Compacta,' 'Gulf Stream' is a very symmetrical dwarf variety with a compact habit. It grows three to four feet tall with an equal spread. Spring growth is bronze; summer color is deep blue-green; and fall color ranges from orange to red with more intense colors occurring in colder weather.

This variety is a good choice for the southeast, since it does not berry or sucker.

Designing with nandina

Carol Lindsay, designer and owner of Design in a Day in Portland, Ore., uses nandina often.

"One of the best uses I have seen was a nandina hedge that used two varieties to hide a hot tub in a small city garden. A short, fluffy nandina hid the legs of a taller variety. The two matched well and looked seamless. It was divine. You could step out the back of the house and only see the garden."

"My own lovely combo of *N. d.* 'Filamentosa' with black mondo grass has been copied galore," Lindsay said.

Tips of the nandina foliage produce a stunning color echo with the dark grass, and the blades of grass mimic the structure and bounce of the nandina leaves, for an arching umbrella feeling. It is especially effective in lots of sun, because the black mondo is not as tall and gets more curl to it in sun, she said.

N. d. 'Filamentosa' has a unique mounding habit with very lacy, deeply cut leaves. It can be used as a specimen and is well adapted to use in rock gardens, around reflecting pools and in mass plantings. Spring foliage is bright green; in fall and winter, foliage turns red/purple. The dwarf selection will grow 3 to 4 feet tall and 2 to 3 feet wide.

Lindsay likes other cultivars too, and explained their distinctive features and design uses.

Plum Passion® has incredible new purple-red growth and is always attractive, "stop-in-your-tracks beautiful," she said. It is the perfect low maintenance plant to use in multiples or by itself in a detailed design, where the plant is its own art form. A taller variety, it looks great in a vignette with wall art, a stone or sculpture, in a really great pot or courtyard.

Or, it could be used as a hedge to soften or hide a fence. "Plant it where you can see it from windows year round," Lindsay suggested.

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The various *Nandina* cultivars offer a rich selection of leaf colors and tones. Flirt™ *Nandina domestica* 'Murasaki' PPAF and Obsession™ *Nandina domestica* 'Seika' PPIP, both Southern Living Plant Collection selections, are shown paired together above. Flirt, shown in the foreground, has purple-red tones on new growth, while Obsession is redder in tone. Another recent introduction is Blush Pink™ *Nandina domestica* 'AKA' PP 19916, right), which holds its blushing red color from spring to fall. The plant keeps a compact habit at maturity, growing to about 30 inches wide and tall. All three selections were introduced by Magnolia Gardens Nursery.



space to show off the fan effect of its stems, and it takes thoughtful placement to mix with other plants," she said. It combines well with needled and highly textured plants, like grasses and dwarf conifers, but looks too busy with most cottage garden plants.

Plum Passion® (*Nandina domestica* 'Monum' P.P.# 12069) was named for the vivid purplish-red foliage that emerges in spring and fall. Bred for increased color, this natural mutation of *N. d.* 'Compacta' that was discovered at Monrovia's tissue culture lab suggests the satiny finish of an unpolished plum. It grows 4 to 5 feet tall by 3 feet wide.

Plum Passion® adds bold, bright contrast to shaded, foliage-intensive landscapes. Its graceful, narrow form makes it useful for narrow openings in paving, for courtyards and entry gardens. Monrovia recommends using exotic greens with this nandina, including Japanese aralia (*Fatsia japonica*), sago palm (*Cycas revoluta*) and holly fern (*Cyrtomium falcatum* 'Rochfordianum').

'Moon Bay' is a shrublet with great color, size, grace, and a unique fluffy texture, Lindsay said. The dwarf variety, which adapts to sun or part shade, has a tight, globe-like shape and erect foliage. Spring foliage is lime green with bronze yellow; summer color goes fully bronze yellow; and fall colors range from orange to red with more intense colors in colder weather.

Lindsay has found the color and sun tolerance of Sienna Sunrise® (*Nandina domestica* 'Monfar' P.P.# 14693, Can. PBR Pending) useful in front of a fence that she wants to show off rather than to hide. The tight, compact plant "cheerfully grounds a fence into the design," she said.

A Monrovia introduction, Sienna Sunrise® boasts an array of fiery colors, including red, orange and yellow to bronzy tones. Its size is just right to make a great perimeter plant, and it looks updated and fresh with copper or



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N. d. 'Gulf Stream', a mutation of *N. d. 'Compacta'* introduced by Hines Horticulture, has leaves that are bronze in color when they first flush out in the spring. By summer, the leaves are a deep blue-green.

mango-colored coreopsis, Lindsay said.

Monrovia suggests using the slow-growing, compact, narrow plant in an Asian style garden, where its dramatic foliage color will provide year-round interest.

Grown from tissue culture

Magnolia Gardens Nursery (MGN), a tissue culture lab in Texas, is a wholesale provider of nandina starts for growers across the nation.

Holly Jones, salesperson for the MGN Liner Division, said the market for nandina was "a little soft" for the past couple of years due to the recession, but now the market has picked up and nandinas are stronger than ever.

"The consumer wants something low maintenance with good color, and nandinas provide both," she said.

April Herring, who is production manager of tissue culture for MGN, is also credited with "inventing" the company's three patented nandinas. "We currently have 20 varieties of nandina in our tissue culture lab," Herring said. "Some are on the market, others are soon to be on the market and others are experimental still."



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▲ NANDINA



ELIZABETH PETERSEN

Versatility is a major selling point for heavenly bamboo (*N. domestica*), which offers all-year interest in a variety of sizes and colors.

Herring helped invent and has written patents for *Nandina domestica* 'AKA' PP 19916 or Blush Pink® *Nandina*, *Nandina domestica* 'Murasaki' PP 21391 or Flirt™ *Nandina* and *Nandina domestica* 'Seika' PP 21891 or Obsession™ *nandina*.

All three are sports of cultivars common in the trade, and all three were discovered in 2004–2005.

"I guess after producing millions of these guys we finally found something that was unique and worth bringing to market," Herring said.

These three cultivars have Japanese names, but naming them started out as a happy accident. Since three people at MGN — April, Kay and Adriana — noticed the selection that became 'AKA,' Herring used their initials as the cultivar name. Coincidentally, MGN was using a Japanese marketing theme and Herring found that AKA also means red is Japanese.

"This was perfect, since Blush Pink® flushes red," she said.

After that, new names continued with the Japanese theme. 'Murasaki' means purple, which suggests the purple-red new growth of Flirt™. 'Seika,' the name given to Obsession™, means sacred fire, a reference to the plant's fire-like red foliage and upright growth.

Nandina domestica 'AKA' (PP#

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19916 Blush Pink™ Nandina) is a sport of *N. d.* 'Firepower' with some "added spice." It boasts unique, long lasting, blush-red growth continuously from spring till fall for excellent year-round interest. Blush Pink™ remains compact at maturity (2 feet tall by 3 feet wide).

Nandina domestica 'Murasaki' (PP#21391 Flirt™ Nandina) is a sport of *N. d.* 'Harbour Dwarf.' It produces wine-red young foliage that is retained while the plant is actively growing. Mature foliage is deep blue green. Flirt™ stays small (12-24 inches tall by 14-20 inches wide) with a tight, dense mounding habit. Plants spread slowly by underground rhizomes with age.

Nandina domestica 'Seika' (PP#21891 Obsession™ Nandina) is a sport of *N. d.* 'Gulf Stream.' It has bright red young foliage that is retained while the plant is actively growing. Mature foliage is deep green. Obsession™ stays small (24-30 inches tall by 20-24 inches wide) with a dense upright habit. It "keeps to itself," not spreading with age, Herring said.

MGN is increasing production of all three new selections that are currently grown exclusively for the *Southern Living* Plant Collection, which has limited sales to the South. MGN hopes to include all three in the new *Sunset* magazine collection, the West's version of the *Southern Living* collection, which will help move the product west.

Herring said demand for tried and true versions of nandina still exceeds demand for the new selections but overall demand is high.

"There are other new selections on the horizon," Herring said, "some ours and others from different breeders. We are really excited about a variegated variety we have been working on. It will brighten the garden and it is unlike any nandina I have seen." ☺

Elizabeth Petersen writes for gardeners and garden businesses, coaches students and writers, and tends a one-acre garden in West Linn, Ore. She can be reached at gardenwrite@comcast.net.



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