

In last week's column, I looked at the steps I would take to plan my garden for the upcoming year. This week, I'd like to introduce you to some interesting plants that you might not have otherwise thought of planting in your garden or landscape this year. If you always plant the same thing in your garden and are tired of the same old thing, I would strongly recommend branching out and trying something new this year.

Peanuts are a low growing shrub type plant that were first grown in South America, but have since spread across the globe and are an important crop in the southern United States. They can be grown in Nebraska, but have a long growing season of ninety days, and up to one hundred and fifty days depending on the variety that you choose for your garden. Peanuts are legumes, similar to peas and soybeans, meaning that they produce beans in pods and take nitrogen from the atmosphere with the assistance of specific types of bacteria within the soil. But being a legume is not what makes peanuts an unusual plant. Around a month after emerging from the soil, peanuts begin to flower. These yellow flowers look very similar to pea flowers, because peanuts and peas are in the same family botanically. The flowers assist in pollination, and once this job is done, they wither and die. The stalk that the flower was on is called a peg. After pollination and fertilization, the peg gets longer and begins to curve toward the ground. This is the reason that peanuts are part of my unusual plants list. This peg goes into the ground, and is what forms the pod and seed that we know as the peanut. These pegs are unique to peanuts and their seed production.

The other interesting plant that I'm going to discuss in this column are castor beans. These plants are part of the spurge family, meaning that they're related to several invasive plants such as leafy spurge. Castor beans are not invasive here in Nebraska, but can be in areas that don't have much of a winter, such as the southern United States. This plant is unusual for a few different reasons. The first is that the leaves are star shaped and have the potential to be around two feet across. They provide a texture to the garden that is vastly different than anything else that you would normally see. They also have very unusual seed pods. They can be up to the size of a golf ball, and are covered in spines, giving it the appearance of an undersea creature. Depending on the variety, the seed pods can be green, to red, to pink. Castor beans are used to produce castor oil, which is used to make polishes, oil, and many other industrial products. A word of warning when growing castor beans, they contain ricin, a very strong natural poison. Do not eat castor beans, or feed them to animals. The plants should be planted in a relatively protected area, as the high Nebraska winds can wreak havoc on the giant leaves, weakening the plant.

When planning your garden, take a moment to think about when was the last time that you tried something new in your garden or landscape. Maybe you could plant peanuts, with their unique peg structure that goes underground to develop the seed. Or castor bean plants with their giant star shaped leaves and seed pods that look like sea urchins. Or you could flip through a seed catalog and pick something else that you enjoy. But the most important thing is to get outside and garden. If you have any questions or would like to suggest a topic for me to write about, feel free to contact me at the Buffalo County Extension Office, at 308-236-1235, or mearnest2@unl.edu.