



## 'Big Blue' Leads the Pack - Colorado Flower Trials Top Performers

One of the most enjoyable ways for gardeners to get through the dark, cold days of January and February is to begin planning next summer's gardens. Over the next few weeks, we'll look at great performers - annuals, perennials, edibles, trees and shrubs – for potential addition to your gardens this summer.

First, we'll take a look at the top performers in Colorado State University's 2018 flower trials. The purpose of CSU's trial gardens is to evaluate the performance of annuals and perennials under the stressful Rocky Mountains growing conditions, which include intense sun, drying winds, severe hailstorms, large fluctuations between day and night temperatures and dry growing conditions. Sounds a lot like Nebraska! Plants are evaluated on plant vigor, abundance of flowers, tolerance to environmental stress, and disease resistance.



The trial gardens, located on CSU's Fort Collins campus, are open to the public and are definitely worth a visit. The gardens are beautiful and plants are labeled, allowing visitors to stroll at will and decide which plants they like best.

### Best of Show

Salvia 'Big Blue' from PanAmerican Seed is this year's Best of Show. This cultivar originated from a cross between *S. longispicata* (no common name) and *S. farinacea* (mealy-cup sage) and is the first ornamental sage of its type available from seed. Both parent species are native to Mexico so 'Big Blue' should be treated as an annual plant in Nebraska.

'Big Blue' is a vigorous summer and fall blooming salvia - it grows fast and provides continuous color with little to no extra care. Deadheading is not required to keep plants looking their best, as it is with other salvias. Tall spikes feature strong blue flowers that are attractive to honeybees, butterflies, hummingbirds and other pollinators. They make great cut flowers, too.

Plants grow tall and strong reaching 24-36 inches in height, thanks to their *S. longispicata* parentage, which is a perennial shrub native to southwestern Mexico. Plant stems are strong and upright. Due to its height, place 'Big Blue' at the back of the flower border where it can provide a colorful backdrop to shorter annuals and perennials. 'Big Blue' also performs well in containers. Plant width is 18-20 inches.

'Big Blue' is easy to grow; plants are at their best in full sun, but will tolerate dappled or partial shade. Below is a partial list of nurseries offering 'Big Blue' seeds:



- Burpee Seed, [www.burpee.com](http://www.burpee.com)
- Harris Seed, [www.harriseseeds.com](http://www.harriseseeds.com)
- Park Seed, [parkseed.com](http://parkseed.com)
- Stokes Seeds, [www.stokeseeds.com](http://www.stokeseeds.com)

You'll love this colorful addition to the garden

## Perennials

One section of the CSU trial program focusses on newly released perennial cultivars, which have been in the nursery trade three years or less. Each cultivar is allowed to overwinter twice in CSU's gardens and is evaluated in summer for the characteristics mentioned above. Two of this year's Top Performers are below.

- Geum 'Rustico Orange' avens – red/orange flowers on deep green mounding foliage. Part to full sun, height 9-10", Zone 5-9. Available from Terra Nova Nurseries.
- Echinacea 'Kismet Raspberry' coneflower – large raspberry colored flowers on compact, 16-18" plants. Flowers from early summer till frost, with each flower lasting several weeks. Full sun, Zone 4-9. Available from Terra Nova Nurseries.

Additional winners are also selected as "Best of Class" from each genus or subgrouping, such as best *Begonia*, *Celosia* or *Calibrachoa*. We don't have space now to go over the features of each, so visit the CSU Flower Trial Garden website, <http://www.flowertrials.colostate.edu/>, for great pictures and more information about each featured plant.

Note - The term cultivar is a contraction of the phrase "cultivated variety", referring to any plant created through human plant breeding efforts, such as repeated plant selection, hybridization or other methods.

## Your Suggestions are Welcome!

Is there a lawn and gardening topic you would like to learn more about? Sarah Browning is an Extension Educator with Nebraska Extension and can be contacted by phone 402 441-7180, by mail at 444 Cherrycreek Road, Lincoln, NE 68528: or by e-mail [sarah.browning@unl.edu](mailto:sarah.browning@unl.edu).

Image of 'Big Blue' salvia, from PanAmerica Seed.



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