

PERENNIAL PLANT OF THE YEAR

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As thoughts turn towards spring planting, consider a Perennial Plant of the Year® for your garden or landscape. See their website at perennialplant.org for a list of winners. I will share information about the 2020 winner in this article. A good plant for shade gardens.

With the number of plants available, it can be overwhelming to select the right one for the right location. One that will thrive, hopefully with minimal care, and we will be happy with its performance. Too often we end up with duds or plants that require more resources and care than we like.

There are a number of programs that evaluate plants to help us select the best one for our site. Such programs are the Great Plants for the Great Plains, Proven Winners, Plants of Merit, All American Selections and others.

As a rule, if you know the growing conditions of your site and select a plant adapted to those conditions from one of these programs, you are more likely to have a plant you will be satisfied with. But we are dealing with nature, and varied care practices, so no guarantees.

One thing I like about the Perennial Plant of the Year® (PPOY) program is most of the plants selected are not new to the market. They are more readily available to purchase than plants that are brand new to the market.

According to the PPOY website, this program began in 1990 to showcase standout perennials. Perennials chosen are suitable for a wide range of growing conditions, require low maintenance, have multiple-season of interest, are relatively insect and disease free and are readily available to buy.

If you need a plant for part to heavy shade, and one that is different than Hosta for a change, consider the 2020 perennial plant of the year. It is Golden Japanese Spikenard (*Aralia cordata* 'Sun King').

It is an excellent complement to Hosta with tropical looking yellow leaves when grown in part shade. Four to six hours of morning sun is best. Leaves will burn with too much sun or if grown in afternoon sun. It can be grown in heavy shade, but leaf color will be chartreuse to lime green.

With medium to rapid growth rate, 'Sun King' quickly forms a large clump of foliage from rhizomes. The plant is listed as growing three feet tall and wide, but has been reported to grow larger under ideal conditions of part sun with moist, fertile soil high in organic matter.

Spikenard blooms in late mid to late summer with tiny white flowers on fairly large showy racemes. Deep purplish inedible berries ripen in fall. Birds love the berries. If berries drop to the ground, they can self-sow but birds usually prevent this.

Like most Aralias, the flowers attract pollinators like bees. This is a criteria we should look for whenever selecting flowering plants. A bonus is deer do not like this plant and will avoid browsing it.

For those who prefer native plants, this is not native to North America but to Asia. It is hardy to zone 4 so tough enough for Nebraska winters.