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Arkansas Diamond Program
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Savvy gardeners know to look for the blue diamond logo when picking out annual flowers for their garden. This logo stands for the Arkansas Diamond plants--good annual plants for your garden which have been grown by local Arkansas growers. The Arkansas Diamond program is a partnership between the Arkansas Green Industry Association, the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service, local growers and independent garden centers. The goal of the program is to educate Arkansas gardeners about annual ornamental plants that consistently perform well in our state.

This will be year three for the program and three more plants have been added to the list. The 2017 annual choices are Big or Whopper begonia, White Christmas caladium and Vista Bubblegum petunia.

Begonias are great plants for our gardens, but the new addition is Big or Whopper depending upon the grower. They are basically the same variety with two different names. These plants come in pink or red with either green leaves or bronze foliage. They will do well in full sun to partial shade. They get large, growing up to more than three feet tall with a two to three foot spread. They rival a dragonwing begonia for size. There are no pest problems, but as with any begonia, they prefer a well-drained soil.

White Christmas caladiums have been on the market for quite a while, but they are a tough caladium which won't stop all summer long. This caladium will really brighten a dark shady spot in the landscape. It will grow in partial sun to deep shade with pure white leaves with green veins. It grows 12 to 24 inches tall. Bulbs can be lifted in the fall to replant next season, or buy new bulbs every year. Don't be too quick to plant caladiums in the spring as they like warm soil to get growing.

Vista Bubblegum petunia is a beautiful bubblegum pink color on a plant that just won't stop blooming all summer long. They typically grow 12 – 18 inches tall with up to a 36 inch spread. They can do well in the ground or in containers or hanging baskets. As with most petunias, they will bloom best if given frequent fertilizer, but this is one that is not as demanding as some of the other varieties. Grows best in full sun with average water and fertilization.

With these three new additions there are now twelve great plants in the Arkansas Diamond program, all worth planting in your garden. As a refresher on past choices they are:

The 2016 plants chosen are two sun lovers – 'Graffiti Red' Pentas and 'Sriracha Pink' Cuphea and the shade loving 'Velvet Elvis' Plectranthus, and the 2015 choices include: red dragonwing begonia, purple angelonia, Cora Cascade polka dot vinca, Redhead Coleus, blue scaevola and gold/yellow lantana. Here is a quick recap of their attributes.

'Graffiti Red' is a newer compact Pentas with bright red flowers that grows up to 10 inches tall. It has a very uniform growth habit, and rarely needs pinching. It will do well

in containers or mass-planted in the ground. It needs a minimum of six hours of sun, but will take more. As with most annual plants, regular fertilizer will keep it blooming at peak performance. While not water-needy, regular watering will keep it looking its best. This plant is a favorite of butterflies and hummingbirds.

Cuphea 'Sriracha Pink' has almost quarter-sized blossoms, giving you a much more dramatic display of color. Like the spicy chili sauce for which it is named, Sriracha Pink adds a lot of color with large, wide-open pink blooms from late spring through fall. The hotter it gets, the better it performs. The plant grows 24-30 inches tall and wide and works well in containers or planted in the ground. Once established, it is very drought tolerant.

'Velvet Elvis' Plectranthus has deep green leaves with a deep purple shade underneath, but it also has beautiful purple blooms which bloom all summer through fall in light shade. The plant has an upright growth habit maturing at 18 to 24 inches tall and wide. It is great in containers, or in mass plantings in the shade garden.

Red dragonwing begonia is a great all season bloomer. This plant does best in full morning sun with protection from the hot afternoon sun or in filtered sunlight. Give this plant room to grow since it does get two to three feet tall and wide by the end of the growing season.

Angelonia or summer snapdragon is another great summer performer in full sun to partial shade. These spike-forming blooms will continue all summer provided they get regular fertilization. It is very heat and drought tolerant, but will bloom best if given supplemental irrigation in dry weather. Mature size will vary by variety, but they have a range between one to three feet tall and a spread of six to twelve inches.

Cora Cascade polka dot vinca is an annual periwinkle. While it only grows 6 to 8 inches high, Cascade™ spreads 32 to 36 inches wide, flowering from frost to frost. The blooms are very evenly distributed, eliminating the "bald spots" that plague some Vinca. Large white to pale pink flowers with a red center bloom on a plant with glossy, dense green foliage. This plant thrives in full sun and is quite drought tolerant. This series is also very disease resistant.

Redhead Coleus is one of the deepest red of any of the coleus plants on the market. Although it will grow in full sun, it would benefit from a bit of shade in the hottest part of the day unless you can keep it well watered. It can also do well in partial shade. The mature plant can be two feet tall and wide.

Blue scaevola or fan flower is another full sun bedding plant, which will tolerate partial shade. The fan shaped flowers are produced all season long on low spreading plants. It is heat and drought tolerant. The plant grows 8-10 inches tall with a spread of 12-24 inches depending on variety.

Lantanas are one of the most heat tolerant bedding plants we have for Arkansas gardens. In south Arkansas, these plants are perennials, but in central Arkansas they are hit and miss, and in the northern tier, they are annuals. Size can vary tremendously

by variety, but they all thrive in full sun and warm conditions. Although they often can survive on their own, in the hottest, driest months a little extra water is appreciated.

When choosing your summer annuals check out the Arkansas Diamonds at your local independent garden centers. To find a list of local retailers who are participating in the program visit the website at <http://www.argia.org/?page=ARDiamondsPartners>. Look for the Arkansas Diamonds logo when shopping, and feel confident that you are supporting local businesses and purchasing plants that will be successful in your garden. While you may find these plants without the Arkansas Diamond logo, it may mean that they were not grown by a local grower or the nursery is not a member of the Arkansas Green Industry Association. The program not only promotes good plants, but also helps to promote local growers and local independent garden centers.

Arkansas Diamond plants are locally grown and Arkansas tough! To find out more about the program you can visit the website at: <https://argia.site-ym.com/?ARDiamonds>